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富士見ファンタジア文庫

Slayers Special Volume 21

Thy name Is Sweet Potato

By Hajime Kanazaka

Machine Translated and Edited by
Eff_Efferson
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Curses Bringer [Part One]

"Have you ever fought a mazoku?"

The man in front of me asked the question with a completely straight face, and for just a moment I was at a loss for words.

The crimson evening sun pouring through the window painted the man's sharp, chiseled face in shades of vermilion and black.

We were in one of the rooms of Lord Giorant's castle, situated a short distance from the town of Bermic.

"Lord" is a title that covers a wide range of situations. Some lords hold vast territories with multiple castles under their rule; others govern a modest patch of land and call a somewhat grand manor their "castle."

Such was the case with the young lord who resided here.

I had been approached this afternoon by a man who introduced himself as Maddick, Captain of the Lord's Personal Guard. He'd found me in the town of Bermic in the middle of what I prefer to call my graceful, all-out annihilation of the afternoon tea-cake buffet, which had reduced the proprietor to tears.

He told me he had a job for me, and his expression was as serious as a man could be. When I hesitated, he leaned close to my ear and murmured:

"—The Lord's life is at stake—"

And that was why I was here.

A small room in one corner of the castle. Brought here on the understanding that he would explain the details of the job, and the very first words out of the mouth of the man before me, Captain Maddick of the Personal Guard, were exactly this.

…Have you heard of Mazoku…

There is no one who walks this earth who has not heard that name.

Among the more commonly encountered variety: Brass Demons and Lesser Demons. Even these, which rank at the very bottom among the mazoku, are opponents that even a seasoned warrior or sorcerer might struggle to defeat at the cost of their life.

…For a seasoned warrior or sorcerer, that is.

The question was put to me. I let a small, cool smile play at the corner of my mouth.

"I have."

A calm answer, and yet Captain Maddick's expression didn't soften one bit.

He pressed on.

"Then … have you ever fought a Pure Mazoku?"

I felt my own smile vanish.

A Pure Mazoku. An existence that dwells in an entirely different league from Brass Demons and Lesser Demons. One that exists for destruction's sake alone, and spreads ruin purely to see things end.

Brass Demons and Lesser Demons will at least bleed if you thrust a sword into them; a sufficiently powerful attack spell can burn them to ash.

But against a Pure Mazoku, a being of pure spiritual essence, ordinary weapons are entirely useless, and most attack spells have no effect whatsoever.

In short: an absolutely, thoroughly, ridiculously troublesome enemy.

But, the fact that he was asking if I'd fought one before must mean …

The captain was watching me steadily.

Truth be told, I had once fought a Pure Mazoku. My encounter with that being, one who bore the name Raugea Thorn, had left a strong impression on me, in more ways than one.

"…Yes," I said, after a brief hesitation.

My voice came out stiffer than I intended.

"What was the outcome?"

"I didn't defeat it, but I'm still alive."

"If you faced one again, would you be confident of winning?"

He pushed.

"I don't know."

An honest answer.

The captain exhaled a deep breath. He turned his gaze toward the window, toward a distant sky.

"To the north," he said, "lies the kingdom of Dilse."

"About twenty years ago, the king there marched his army into the northern wastes, the Katart Mountain Range, where mazoku dwell, and he came back bearing an unbreakable curse they had laid upon him."

I had heard that rumor before.

"It is just a rumor. I cannot say whether it's true or false. But, right now, our Lord finds himself in a situation very similar to that one. That is what I believe."

…Well. That was a rather heavy opening.

He brought his gaze back to me and looked straight into my eyes.

"Would you be willing to lend us your strength?"

…Hm…

I laughed a little and dropped my shoulders.

"I'm not interested in doing anything reckless, I can't guarantee success, and my fees aren't cheap. If you can live with all of that—"

"I'm asking you."

The captain said it and gave a firm nod.

A crow called out somewhere in the distance.

A few bonfires burning here and there could never drive back the cold that came pressing in with the night. But the look on the soldiers' faces as they kept their watch was not just about the cold.

The night comes again. That thing comes again.

Fear was etched into their expressions.

Every night, a cursed voice, produced by something that was not human, rang out and tormented the Lord where he lay, struck down by a mysterious illness that baffled every physician.

I scanned the darkness.

Dense coniferous forest surrounded us on all sides. The night wind teased the leaves and carried a rustling that sounded almost like a distant whisper.

My eyes met those of Captain Maddick, who stood nearby.

He had been in light armor earlier in the evening, but now he was in full plate armor, dragon-crested helmet included, with a great spear in his hand, fully battle-ready.

—Not that against a Pure Mazoku, all that armor and helmeting would be worth more than paper, and the spear would be more useful left behind to save the weight. But still.

"It should be… about time," he murmured quietly.

His words were almost like a signal.

Because what followed came from much closer than expected.

"Hohhhh ho ho ho ho ho!"

"...It's you?! Fireball!!"

KABOOM.

"GYAAAAAAAAAA—!?"

My furious spell connected with perfect accuracy and sent the source of that bizarre laughter flying.

A moment later, the thing lay at my feet, trussed up and tied. Long black hair. A ridiculously revealing outfit. A skull necklace at the throat. Spike-studded shoulder guards on the shoulders.

Captain Maddick eyed this from a cautious distance, actually, he was eyeing the thing at my feet and cleared his throat quietly.

"…I… is that… a Pure Mazoku…?"

"No."

I denied it instantly.

Calling that a Pure Mazoku, the ancestral enemy of all humanity, would be a grievous insult to Pure Mazoku everywhere.

The thing at my feet twitched faintly, and in the very next instant, it had lurched upright and was shouting while still bound.

"What do you think you're doing, Lina?! You're interfering with my work!!"

"GYAAAAHHH—!?"

The guards watching nearby screamed in surprise at its sudden movement. But I am not the type to be startled by that sort of thing. I narrowed my eyes and scowled.

"Pipe down!! You're the one doing something weird in a weird place!! Naga!!"

Yes. The entity that had been making my life difficult for the past several minutes was none other than my self-proclaimed rival, the One-Woman Parade of Chaos, the White Serpent, Naga!

I'm fairly sure she's human. Though I admit I'm not exactly certain.

Captain Maddick kept his distance and said, "…B-but, Lady Lina, the voice we've been hearing every night until now, it did sound exactly the same as hers just now…"

"What a coincidence."

Still trussed up, Naga puffed out her chest with remarkable poise.

"The truth is, I've been spending every night lately in the forest nearby, laughing loudly."

"I knew it was you!! And why, exactly, were you out there laughing in the forest every night?!"

"Hmph! What a foolish question, Lina! I told you … it's a job! One gold coin a day, just for laughing around here at night!"

"You can't be serious!?"

"W-wait just a moment!!" Captain Maddick called out in dismay. "So that voice was this person all along? But every night when the laughing started, the Lord would suffer, and we all got terrible headaches…"

"Well, yes. If you have to listen to that kind of ridiculous cackling night after night, of course you'll get headaches. Your health would suffer."

"…W-wait a moment…"

The captain let out a long, stunned breath.

"So… the idea that it was a mazoku was nothing more than our own assumption? And the Lord's illness is just… ordinary sickness?"

I turned on my heel in response.

My cloak caught the night breeze and billowed in the moonlight.

I looked at the captain and said plainly:

"No.

It may not be a mazoku's doing, but this is a perfectly respectable attempted assassination."

It took everyone a moment to process those words.

"…A-an assassination?!"

Captain Maddick was the first to react. The soldiers started murmuring.

"H-hold on, Lina!! I was hired to laugh and that's it; I didn't do anything as drastic as attempt an assassination!!" Naga protested from behind me, still struggling in her bonds.

I didn't bother to look at her.

"I know that. But Naga was given a strange job: laugh in the forest near here once a night, for one gold coin a day. And every night after that, the Lord suffered.

That means someone was trying to assassinate the Lord and pin the blame on 'that bizarre cackling creature'; in other words, on Naga."

"I see!"

"Who are you calling bizarre?!"

Setting aside Naga's entirely understandable protests, I turned to the captain.

"Now that we know this, what happens next is technically your department, wouldn't you say?"

He stared at the ground for a moment, thinking, then looked up.

"You are correct. But, Lady Lina, knowing all of that, I would like to ask you once more: will you help us resolve this matter?"

"…Huh…?"

I couldn't help letting out a small sound.

Honestly, I had zero desire to get involved in something as messily complicated as an attempted assassination of a lord.

I'd deliberately emphasized the words "personal guard captain" to appeal to his professional pride, expecting it would make it awkward for him to say no to handling it himself. But he kept going, eyes meeting mine directly:

"You're right that seeking help from an outsider even after learning it isn't a mazoku may invite criticism, 'what's the use of a personal guard?' But what we of the Guard are sworn to protect is not our own reputation. It is the Lord's life."

…Well. For someone bearing the title of "Captain of Whatsit," he's refreshingly straightforward.

"And… well…"

He glanced briefly toward Naga.

"The logical first step in any investigation is to question this… Naga… about whoever hired her. But honestly, I have no idea how one goes about dealing with a creature like that."

"Fair enough."

"Hey! You two!!"

Ignoring Naga's outburst again, the captain pressed on with a troubled look.

"…And the Lord's condition is far from good, as things stand. There is not a moment to spare. I beg you most sincerely, please, lend us your aid."

I exhaled and smiled wryly.

"—All right. I'll help."

Well, credit to the captain for being a decent person.

"—I am deeply grateful—"

The captain bowed his head.

"If time is short, we need to narrow down the suspects. In cases like this, it's usually some succession squabble or family dispute. What's the Lord's family situation?"

"Well… his father passed away five years ago, and the Lord fell ill just before his upcoming wedding… His only family is really his younger brother, Lord Shezal."

I pressed my right index finger against my temple.

"Sorry. The younger brother is guilty."

He really was.

We all piled into the room together. The moment I walked in and said 'I know everything' to see how he'd react, the would-be mastermind turned white as a sheet and immediately started apologizing. He was so pitifully useless it almost brought tears to your eyes, and yet when asked 'what did you do to the Lord?' he answered without missing a beat:

"I don't know!!"

The spacious room was tucked away in a private corner of the castle. It was well-furnished, as befitting the Lord's younger brother's quarters.

Present in the room were me, Naga, the captain, and a complement of soldiers. Naga had agreed to cooperate once the captain promised to overlook her role in all this and pay her fee, and so she'd switched sides.

"Excuse me?! You DON'T KNOW?!"

I stepped right up to him and kept my voice low.

Surrounded by ten-plus people, Shezal: He looked to be around twenty, with a beard he'd clearly forced himself to grow, looked back at us nervously from under his brows and said:

"W-well… the one actually doing it is a curse-caster…"

"A curse-caster?"

Naga and I said it at the same time.

A curse-caster. The public tends to imagine someone spending their days sneaking around putting hexes on everyone, but the reality is a bit different. They are sorcerers who specialize in what is called "curse magic", ritual magic

with delayed effects. Because the spells are slow to take hold, require extensive preparation and materials, and involve elaborate, tedious ceremonies, they carry a gloomy reputation.

But what curse magic lacks in flashiness, it makes up for in reach: it can produce widespread, lasting effects that ordinary magic cannot.

Enchanting weapons with magical power, or my own personal technique of gathering gemstones into a Jewels Amulet, those also fall under the heading of curse magic.

Some accounts claim curse magic can even influence the weather, or strike a fragment of a star from the heavens down onto the earth, though that has never been confirmed.

And among curse magic's many methods, there are apparently those that can curse a person, drive them to illness, and in some cases, cause death.

The person this idiot younger brother had hired to assassinate the Lord was one such curse-caster.

"Then what's the curse-caster's name, description, and where does he live?"

"I… I only know his name, Solis… I met him at a tavern in town! He was around my age, a pretty boy with silver hair."

"That's him!!"

Naga's voice rang out from behind.

"He's the one who hired me to laugh! Silver hair, black scarf. I thought he was rather refined, having me fill the forest with my laughter every night, but…"

Refined. Sure.

"And where does this person live?" the captain asked.

Shezal looked down.

"I… don't know."

"What?! You DON'T KNOW?!"

I leaned in closer.

"I'll warn you: if you give me one more stupid evasion, things are going to get very unpleasant for you. Deliberately."

"I really don't know! Look, I'm just a second son who can't inherit anything! … Sometimes I'd sneak into town and drink at the tavern to cheer myself up. He was just someone I'd started drinking with. You don't ask a drinking buddy where he lives. I was there incognito, so if he'd asked me the same question, I'd have been the one in trouble.

…But thinking about it now… he might have known who I was all along.

When it was announced my brother was getting married, the day I thought, 'now I'll never inherit anything' and went to the tavern to drink, he told me he was a curse-caster. He joked about it, and then said: if there's someone in your way, I could curse them to death for you. Won't come cheap, though.

…I was drunk, and I said my brother's name out loud… He said, 'Bring me something of his, hair, a nail clipping, a possession', and I thought it was a joke, so I gave him my brother's handkerchief…

…A few days later… my brother collapsed…

…And then I got scared…"

"How much did you pay him?"

"…Nothing…"

He shook his head weakly.

"He said… payment in full after everything's done, and for now, just let him drink on my tab. So I thought he was joking…"

"No advance payment? Really?"

"Y-yes!"

"Hmm…"

I looked him over, then turned away.

"In that case… you've been marked by someone with very bad intentions."

"Wh-what do you mean?"

I looked at Naga.

"Naga, you already got paid by this silver-haired Solis, right?"

"But of course! Twenty days' work. Ten gold coins up front, rest to be paid at the tavern when the job's done!"

I nodded and turned back to Shezal.

"Solis spent his own money to hire Naga for this, even though you'd paid him nothing. He had her laugh in the forest every night. If the Lord had simply fallen ill with no explanation, people might eventually suspect a curse. But if there's also a bizarre cackling voice every night, suspicion goes there first. Even if Naga got caught, it would be hard to trace it back to Solis quickly, and who would believe what Naga says anyway, so he could just deny everything."

"…Excuse me, Lina…"

I pretended not to hear the voice behind me.

"In other words, it was a stalling tactic. Any straightforward investigation would only figure out it was a curse after the Lord was beyond saving. That was the plan."

What Solis hadn't calculated for was Shezal being quite so spectacularly spineless.

If this fool had held firm under my bluff, the plan would have almost certainly worked.

…Of course, there was no guarantee it wasn't already too late.

"The Lord collapses. You, the younger brother, inherit everything. Then Solis appears and says: 'Unless you pay me, I'll tell everyone who ordered the Lord killed.' Probably something like that."

"So that man is—"

The captain's murmur was answered with my nod.

"He's someone who stirred up this household crisis so he could exploit it."

"That can't be…!"

"Don't 'that can't be' me, you fool."

Thwack.

My boot connected with Shezal's face.

"What are you—!?"

"Listen. You keep acting like you were deceived too, but drunk or joking or whatever, you actually said 'kill my brother' and literally handed over his handkerchief. It's a bit late to play the victim now."

He went silent and slumped.

I turned to the captain.

"What you do with this idiot brother is up to you. The problem is Solis. We can't do anything without stopping him.

Naga, how many days has it been since you took this job?"

"How rude, calling it 'cackling'…! Seven days. Today is the seventh."

"So thirteen days remain… or maybe less…"

"Thirteen days?!"

The captain spoke up.

I nodded.

"Naga's contract was for twenty days. That means Solis is confident he can take the Lord's life within that window. Seven days have passed, which means thirteen days or fewer remain. We need to find Solis and make him stop the curse within that time. That is what we have to do."

The search began that very night.

The personal guard and all other available soldiers spread out to find Solis. At the same time, we explored alternative approaches.

A sufficiently knowledgeable curse-caster can sometimes undo another's curse. Naga and I lack that knowledge, unfortunately, but if we could find a traveling curse-caster or contact one through the regional sorcerers' guild, they might be able to lift the curse on the Lord.

In all honesty, the odds of this working were extremely low. Curse-casters are rare among sorcerers in general, and because the title carries an unfortunate stigma, few would publicly identify themselves as one. Finding one in the time remaining would be difficult.

Even if we did find one, there was no guarantee they would know how to counter Solis's specific curse.

So that option was a nice-to-have, nothing more.

In the meantime, as a stopgap, we arranged six Jewels Amulets in a six-pointed star formation around the Lord. His symptoms eased slightly, but it was, at best, a temporary measure to buy a little time.

Which meant the only real option was finding Solis ourselves.

Bermic is not a large town.

That worked in our favor.

A dwelling that might belong to Solis was reportedly in the forest beyond the town's edge. The report arrived with eleven days left on the clock.

He had bought food and visited the tavern; he'd left more of a trail than we expected.

That evening, our party: Myself, Naga, Captain Maddick, and nearly twenty soldiers; moved through the forest in the direction of Solis's suspected hideout.

"Things are looking up," the captain said as we walked side by side.

"…Probably…" I answered vaguely.

If we told him that Shezal had confessed everything, Solis would probably undo the curse willingly. With his scheme collapsed, he had no reason to keep the Lord suffering. But if he got wind of our approach and fled before we could tell him, things would get complicated.

"Listen up," I told the group. "When we find Solis, don't attack on sight, and whatever you do, don't let him die. Having him lift the curse himself is the fastest and most reliable option."

"Understood. Everyone, remember that. Also, we're getting close. Keep it quiet."

The soldiers nodded in silence.

We moved through the dense forest along a narrow trail barely wider than an animal track. The orange glow of the setting sun filtered between the cedar trunks in patches, staining the world in uneven light, and our party pressed deeper and deeper until, through a stand of cedars and bare-branched trees, we found a house.

The sky at its edges was just starting to darken to indigo.

The captain signaled silently. The soldiers fanned out in a jog, surrounding the house. Before we could stop them…

CRASH!

The lead soldiers were struck and hurled off their feet!

"What the…!?"

No wonder there were cries of shock. What had sent them flying was the last thing anyone, even Naga or I, expected: the bare dead trees standing nearby!

They writhed like serpents preparing to strike, brown trunks and branches coiling and waving.

"What IS this?!"

"Stay calm! Wood golems, or trees being controlled by curse magic … or something like that! If you stay level-headed they're manageable!!"

I called out to the panicking soldiers.

Whatever they were, they seemed to have been given orders to attack anyone who crossed a certain perimeter. They weren't truly formidable enemies.

Naga and I began to chant.

"Freeze Brid!!"

Crack …kssssh!!

The bolts we fired struck the writhing trees and burst into cold energy on contact, instantly encasing them in ice.

"Covering fire! Move!!"

"R-right!!"

Captain Maddick and the soldiers surged forward. Naga and I kept running too, chanting as we went.

"Freeze Brid!!"

"Damu Brass!!"

"Icicle Lance!!"

We unleashed spell after spell on the moving trees. They froze, they shattered, unable to fulfill their mission of blocking the path, and one by one fell still.

"Almost there!!"

The captain slashed away a grasping branch with his sword and broke through the line of trees. He and his men split into flanking groups and surrounded the house.

They moved with crisp, practiced efficiency.

The house itself looked unremarkable from outside: single-storey, four rooms at most. Whether there was a basement, impossible to say.

The windows were shuttered. No light inside. Though it was dinner time, no smoke rose from the chimney. No presence of a person, either.

Though of course, whoever lived here could simply be holding still in the dark, or sleeping through it all.

Darkness had spread broadly across the sky by now. The inside of the unlit building would be essentially pitch-black.

I moved to the captain's side.

"Want a magic light?"

They had lanterns, but those would be awkward in a fight.

"If you would."

"Draw your sword."

I murmured a spell and reached out to the tip of the blade he presented.

"Light!"

Light bloomed at the steel's tip. Enough to illuminate the surroundings, but not so bright as to be blinding.

Everyone looked at one another, and nodded … BOOM.

A soldier slammed his body into the front door and broke it open.

The soldiers poured in, the captain at the head.

"Curse-caster Solis!! Lord Shezal has told us everything!! Stand down and there will be mercy for you!!"

The captain's voice rang through the building.

No answer came. No movement.

The soldiers swept through each room, and after a moment,

"—Lady Lina!!"

The captain was calling for me.

I exchanged a glance with Naga and we stepped inside.

In the light of the magic torch: a corridor, then rooms. A bed. Personal effects. Someone had lived here.

But no one was here now.

"They've gone…" the captain said.

Clearly they had. But not just out for dinner.

For the past several days, a wide-scale search for Solis had been happening throughout the town. He would have heard about it if he'd ventured out, and if he had, he would know his plan had failed.

Which meant he no longer had a reason to keep cursing the Lord.

But the curse was continuing. What did that mean?

I said, with a grim expression:

"This is bad… Solis is performing the ritual… somewhere else entirely."

(Curses Bringer: to be continued!)

Next time: the curse-caster Solis is nowhere to be found! Will Lina and company manage to track him down and save the Lord in time?

…If we ended this arc with "well, it didn't work out, the Lord died," I think everyone would be a bit upset. The editor especially!

Anyway, next up: Curses Bringer, Part Two!

Wait for it while eating some lotus root and asparagus sautéed in butter and soy sauce!

Curses Bringer [Part Two]

The Story so far: Lina received a job in the town of Bermic: lift a curse from a local lord. Together with Captain Maddick of the Personal Guard and Naga, who happened to join up along the way, Lina pinpointed the curse's mastermind: the Lord's younger brother Shezal. And from his lips came the name of the actual perpetrator: curse-caster Solis.

They tracked down the house where Solis was supposedly hiding, fought their way through enchanted trees, and stormed it, only to find it completely empty. Solis had been conducting the ritual from an entirely different location.

Can Lina and her companions find the curse-caster in time?

"There's no time to despair."

My words, however, did nothing to lift the heavy atmosphere.

… Well, it was hard to blame the captain and his men for being downcast. The Lord had perhaps ten days left at most, possibly less, and the only lead they'd had, Solis's house, had turned out to be empty when they finally broke through a gauntlet of attacking trees to reach it.

The road back was through a dark forest. Wind rustled through the branches. Somewhere an owl was hooting. The only light came from the orange glow of the soldiers' lanterns.

In short, it was the most perfectly dispiriting situation possible.

But.

"We still have a chance to turn this around."

"…Do we… really…?"

Even the captain's voice lacked its usual strength.

"If Solis wasn't at that house, doesn't that mean he could have gone to another town entirely and is performing the ritual from there? In that case, we'll never find him…"

"No."

I shook my head firmly.

"Solis is still somewhere nearby. I'm certain of it."

At those words, the group stopped walking.

The mood shifted.

"Is that true, Lady Lina?! What's your basis for that?!"

The captain's voice had regained its energy. I pointed at Naga.

"She's my basis."

"Me?"

Naga, who had been vaguely drifting along in her own thoughts, blinked.

"Yes. Solis hired Naga for twenty days of forest laughing. As misdirection. Think about it; this means he started the ritual at the same time Naga's job began. Which means he can only have traveled as far as he could between giving Naga her instructions and starting the ritual. He could not have gone to a location more than half a day from this town."

"That… makes sense!!"

Even by the dim lamplight, I could see the captain's face brighten with hope.

"But then… where?!"

"Well…"

I deflated slightly.

"I know for certain he isn't far away. As for exactly where… that I don't know."

"…I see…"

The captain's shoulders sagged again.

"We thought we'd thoroughly searched the whole town…"

"Did you really search it properly?" Naga chimed in from the side, with a somewhat teasing tone. "You didn't forget to check somewhere obvious, like the Lord's own family crypt, for instance?"

"Why would we search a place like that?"

"Hm?"

I shot back at her, puzzled by the question.

But Naga furrowed her brow at me, baffled.

"Of course you'd search it! Wouldn't anyone?!"

"Why would you, though?"

"Excuse me?!"

Naga looked increasingly put-out, and even let out a small condescending laugh.

"Hmph! What are you saying, Lina! It should be obvious that a handkerchief alone wouldn't be enough to curse someone to death! So the ritual must be conducted somewhere deeply connected to the target. That's basic knowledge of curse magic."

"B-basic…?"

I stared at her with stunned eyes.

"Naga… you actually know about curse magic?!"

I had vague memories of her saying something like she didn't really know much about curse magic before…

"I don't know it in depth, I said that before. I can't identify what kind of curse was used from the symptoms or work out how to break it or reflect it."

"…Wait… you don't know it in depth… but you do have basic knowledge of curse magic?"

"Yes."

Just like that.

At that simple answer, Naga excepted, every single person present: me, the captain, all the soldiers; put their heads in their hands simultaneously.

"THEN SAY SO EARLIER!!"

"What?!"

Naga looked genuinely bewildered.

"What are you talking about, Lina? Basic knowledge of curse magic is something any girl learns from her mother as a child! You know that, right?"

"No I don't! No one teaches that!"

The captain and every soldier behind her nodded in unison.

"Really? Is that so? …Maybe that was just something unique to my family's upbringing?"

What a disturbing family upbringing that would be. Whatever her family was, I had no idea, and I intended to keep it that way.

"…Right… anyway… Naga, you have basic knowledge of curse magic. Based on that, can you predict how Solis is operating?"

"Hmm…"

Naga tilted her head.

"To cast a powerful curse, you need something more directly connected to the target. Depending on the caster's strength and method, if all you have is a used handkerchief and you're far away, the most you could manage is giving someone a mild case of illness. The Lord is young, his own life force is almost certainly stronger than what the curse can generate at a distance. So Solis would need to strengthen his connection to the target somehow.

The most efficient method would be to perform the ritual as close to the target as possible. …Oh!!"

Naga seemed to have realized something. She turned to the captain.

"Could it be! Is there a strange man in the room next to the Lord's, performing suspicious rituals?!"

"No. Someone would have noticed that immediately."

The captain waved his hand, rejecting the idea.

Fair enough.

"Then the nearby option is out. In that case… performing the ritual at something like the Lord's family burial site? That's a place where the blood of countless ancestors converges."

"A burial site. I see," I said.

"But… a burial site…" The captain looked troubled. "We do have the late lord and his consort's tomb in the castle's inner courtyard. But it isn't underground, and anyone conducting a ritual there would be immediately visible. Beyond that, the previous ancestors' tombs, Lord Giorant took possession of this land and castle eight years ago from the previous lord. His older ancestors' remains are at his family's original seat of power, which is a ten-day journey or more on foot. That's too far, as you said."

"Then… what does that mean?"

I turned to Naga.

"I… don't know beyond this. I told you, it's just basic knowledge. Something has to be strengthening the connection to the target. If it isn't proximity and it isn't a burial site, then…"

"...Wait a moment."

Naga's words snagged on something in my mind.

"If he's close enough, he can kill someone with a curse?"

"Yes. It also depends on distance, time, and having a reasonably large area for the ritual space. Essentially, a kind of deliberately destabilized magical barrier is used. The distortion that creates is then sent into the target. The handkerchief is probably used to specify who receives that distortion."

"…Which means…"

I thought it through.

A magical barrier's strength depends on either the power of the ritual implements or simply the size of the magic circle. The further from the center of the barrier, the weaker its effect.

So somewhere not far from the Lord's modest castle, there must exist a large — or powerfully-equipped — barrier.

Solis was using the distortion it generated and channeling it through the handkerchief to the Lord.

A large enough area, in this vicinity… it couldn't be that…

…Actually…

It could.

"Captain Maddick."

I turned to him.

"Countermeasure one: move the Lord to a location away from the castle, to reduce the curse's effect as much as possible."

"That's fine, but it'll only buy us a little time, won't it?"

"Yes. So while we're buying that time, we find Solis. Which means, I need you to tell me honestly: where are the emergency escape tunnels in that castle?"

The captain frowned.

"Emergency escape tunnels? …You mean… you're not saying…?!"

"Yes."

I nodded.

"Every castle has them, probably underground. I think Solis may be conducting his ritual in one of them."

They moved the Lord from the castle to a requisitioned inn as soon as we returned from the forest. Then the three of us: the captain, Naga, and I; came back to the Lord's now-vacant room to search.

The current Lord himself didn't know about the tunnels. His father had moved the family here eight years prior, taken over the existing castle with minor renovations, and apparently had never relayed information about the escape passages to his heir.

But even a modest castle is still a castle. Emergency exits had to exist somewhere.

The captain mused aloud as he surveyed the bare stone of the stripped room — Naga and I had gone through it thoroughly.

"Even if there is a tunnel — what if it was sealed during the renovations? The previous lords would have known about it. A secret passage connected to the Lord's private chambers is an assassin's dream."

"Whether the passage still leads somewhere isn't the point," I said. "What matters is whether an underground space exists, and whether Solis is in it."

"If it was sealed during construction, how do we even search?"

"We start by pulling off the surface stone. Then go from there."

"P-pulling the surface stone…"

The captain stared around the room with a pained look.

"That's quite a job… we'd need to gather workers quickly…"

"No need."

I began murmuring a spell.

"Golem!!"

I pressed my palm to the floor and released the Word of Power. The stone floor writhed and shifted, gathering itself — and the magic animated it into a stone giant.

The captain let out a stunned groan at the golem's appearance.

"Use that!" he said.

"Sit in the corner and hug your knees."

"EHHH?!"

The captain was the one who shouted in protest — not the golem, which obediently shuffled to the corner and sat down exactly as instructed.

Admittedly, it looked a bit like a sulking child, which was rather endearing.

"Don't misunderstand me," I told the captain. "The goal wasn't to have the golem do something. The goal was to create it."

"Huh? …Oh!!"

He looked at the floor. The stone surface was gone. Completely removed. Bare earth was exposed underneath.

By constructing a golem from the room's stone surface, I had simultaneously stripped the walls and floor bare. The stone-removal job was done.

"Clever… but…"

He looked around and his expression darkened.

No trace of a hidden passage could be seen in the exposed earth.

"…Was it sealed? Or was there never one in the first place…"

I was stroking my chin and considering when Naga said, with the most innocent expression:

"What are you talking about, Lina? The trace of the escape tunnel is right there."

Everyone stared where she was pointing.

At first glance, it looked like ordinary dirt — but on second look, one patch was distinctly different in color from the surrounding soil.

There! They'd brought in fill dirt from somewhere else when they sealed the passage — which had left this subtle color difference.

"If we dig along that differently-colored section—"

We exchanged looks, nodded — and Naga and I began to chant the earth-tunneling spell.

How many times we chanted it, how far we dug — at some point we lost count.

And then —

"Earth Pierce!"

The tunnel I bored punched through into — not more soil — but open darkness on the other side.

We'd broken through. Into something.

We looked at each other, nodded, and stepped into the dark.

Our light source was my shortsword, its tip enchanted with a magic flame. I could sheathe it to extinguish the light if needed.

"We move carefully from here," I said in a low voice. "If Solis is down here and notices us first, he might flee and continue the ritual somewhere else."

"…Understood."

The captain's voice was equally low.

We walked in silence through the pitch-black corridor.

"What's wrong, Lina?" Naga asked at last.

"…We hit a fork."

I said it with a grim tone.

Escape tunnels often have multiple branching paths built in, to confuse pursuers. Choosing the wrong branch could send us wandering endlessly.

"So we don't know which way to go?"

The captain's words. I nodded.

"That's about the size of it. Since we don't know where Solis is, we'd have to search branch by branch… but…"

And then… I noticed something.

This was, possibly,

"…No; He's here! Solis is in here! This way!!"

I said it with full confidence and strode into one of the branching paths without hesitation.

Flames crackled in the dark. The heavy, damp air carried a rich, unmistakable smell.

The underground chamber was about large enough to hold Solis's forest house if you squeezed it in. The ritual was being conducted inside.

On the ground: a white magic circle. A reversed five-pointed star. Its key points were packed with symbols and script that would mean nothing to a layperson.

Around the circle: assorted ritual objects. Animal skulls, plant specimens, oddly colored stones, figurines made of bone and sticks.

At various points within the circle and around it, bonfires blazed, bathing the ritual space in wavering orange.

Outside the ring of fire, crouched beside one of the bonfires, was a man.

From here we couldn't see his face, but the hair that spilled down the back of his cloak gleamed silver even in the near-darkness.

That confirmed it.

We checked the other entrances to the chamber, nodded to each other…

"Curse-caster Solis!!"

The captain's voice rang clearly through the space. The man jolted upright.

He turned to face us slowly.

He looked about twenty. Fine-featured face. Black robe and black cloak. A collection of necklaces and bracelets made of bone and stone. Black scarf. Silver hair.

And in his right hand: a skewer of ham.

Yes. He had been grilling ham over one of the bonfires.

Probably a late-night snack.

When we'd broken through from the Lord's room, we'd created an airflow between the two spaces — and that airflow had carried the smell of cooking ham, guiding us directly here.

The branching paths might have seemed like a labyrinth, but the scent of grilling ham only ever came from one direction. We had simply followed our noses.

For his twenty-day ritual seclusion, he had clearly packed supplies — onions, corn, and more, sitting in a box nearby.

The wonderful smell of cooking ham filled the air. The man's gaze was cold as he looked at us.

"Ehhhh? I think there's been a mistake. I just happened to be passing through…"

"DON'T LIE TO US!!"

The captain and I both shouted at the same instant.

Then Naga stepped forward.

"Hohhh ho ho ho! You thought that would fool me?! How naive!! Surely you haven't forgotten my face!?"

"…You…!!"

The man's expression flickered slightly. He took a bite of his ham.

"Yes! We met at a tavern once! Your clever little lie might have fooled others — but not me, the White Serpent Naga!! Curse-caster Solis!!"

She pointed at him dramatically.

The man waved his hand.

"Actually, I'm his twin brother."

"…Oh."

Naga hesitated and looked at us.

"…He says it's a case of mistaken identity…"

"Don't believe that for a second!! He literally just said 'you' when he recognized your face; we all heard it!!"

"Damn… I slipped…"

I can't believe he's acting like he barely missed getting away with it.

"Enough of this! Shezal has told us everything!! His chances of inheritance are gone!! You gain nothing more from this; you're only making things worse for yourself!!"

The captain invoked the name of Solis's co-conspirator.

That should have removed any reason for Solis to continue.

But.

"…Heh…"

Solis laughed softly through his nose.

"So he got caught. Faster than I expected. Well, I suppose that's rather like him."

He held the captain's gaze without a trace of unease.

"Do you understand?! Even if you curse the Lord, you gain nothing now!!"

"You're the ones who don't understand. Did you really think I agreed to curse the Lord just for the money?"

He still wore that relaxed smile.

…This one, could it be?

"What do you mean?!"

"Very well! I'll explain everything!!"

Solis swept his cloak dramatically,

"This I…"

"Fireball."

KABOOM!

My attack spell, mid-speech apologies and all, blasted the curse-caster Solis off his feet with a concussive roar.

"…Ow… what exactly was the point of that…"

When he came around and found himself hogtied, Solis gave me a deeply aggrieved, tear-streaked look.

"Well," I said, scratching my head, "you looked so relaxed and were about to start a long monologue, and I figured someone this collected has probably also prepared an escape route. I thought you'd talk your fill and then bolt, so I figured I'd just blast you first."

Silence. He turned his face away. Tears rolled down his cheeks.

"I was right? Wasn’t I?"

"…Yes."

He nodded, still looking the other way.

Ha! I read him perfectly!

"Now then. Since we've established you can't run. Tell me what you were about to say. 'This I… uh… what comes next?"

With a tear-stained, half-defiant expression, Solis said:

"I was going to say: this, me, the reason I cursed the Lord — the real reason — let me tell you that!!"

"Oh. That's where the sentence was going."

He wept again for a moment.

"...So?"

"…It was revenge. That was my intention."

Prompted by me, he began to speak, halting and slow.

"Think about it!! How did I know about this escape tunnel, known only to the Lord's own bloodline?! Because I am connected to that bloodline!! My blood connects me to the family that held this land!!"

"You're related to the Lord?"

The captain narrowed his eyes.

"Impossible! Lord Giorant's family—"

"Not Giorant's family!! The family of Lord Heizes, who controlled this land and castle before Giorant was appointed! Do you see?! If the world had gone differently, I could have been the lord of this land!!"

"Could it be — an illegitimate child?!"

"…No…"

Solis shook his head.

"My uncle's wife's cousin married the third son of the previous lord…"

"That's SO DISTANT!!"

We all shouted it at the same time.

That family tree has zero possible path to him becoming a lord under any circumstances.

"That's not even a relation," Naga said.

"How dare you!!"

He bristled.

"In words alone it might seem like a tenuous connection, perhaps."

"It IS tenuous."

"SILENCE!! My father and that third son were bound by a deep friendship that even my childhood eyes could recognize. My father would quietly pressure his father's business rivals when business was bad, and in return, the third son would quietly provide funds when he needed money for a certain woman. The purest bond between men!!"

"I… well… anyway. Please continue."

I had completely run out of the will to argue.

"This place was where that friendship was forged. I visited with my father sometimes as a child, to learn the trade."

A place for private dealings. That explains it.

"But then ruin came. Giorant happened to visit this land and, in the most contemptible act imaginable, reported all of Lord Heizes's various activities to the king!! The Heizes family was dismissed!! My father lost his ability to hush things up, and everything he'd been doing came to light, and the business fell apart, and my father ran off with the money, and the family scattered, and I was forced to give up my dream of spending my life doing absolutely nothing!!"

"…This is all your own doing, isn't it."

"AND THEN!! Why are you all grilling ham and ignoring me while I'm telling my story?!"

"We were hungry."

"I AM LESS IMPORTANT THAN HAM?! My beautiful, surprising secret backstory — if you heard the whole thing, at least one or two dozen people would understand my position and want to take my side!!"

"After everything you just said, anyone who takes your side is either a masochist or a criminal.

Anyway…"

I walked up to him, grilled ham skewer in hand.

"Let's get to the point. Tell me how to undo the curse you cast on the Lord."

"…Heh…"

Solis sighed and pointed toward the magic circle.

"…The ram skulls placed around that circle… smear them with a child's living blood, and the curse will be lifted…"

"I see."

I glanced at the circle.

"In that case, let's swap out what you've placed in the center — the Lord's handkerchief and your scarf — and give it a try."

"No wait I'm sorry that was a lie!!"

Immediately caught, Solis collapsed into an apology.

And so the mystery was solved.

The curse was ultimately stopped by the simplest possible method — as Naga suggested, just destroy the magic circle.

Solis was handed over to the captain. Both Naga and I received our fees. Job done.

The Lord's condition was reportedly improving, slowly but surely.

One last thing nagged at me.

I learned afterward from the captain that Solis had gotten his start in curse magic because, as a child, his father had taught him the basics.

…So… Naga wasn't joking when she said that sort of thing runs in certain families. It actually happens.

A winter's afternoon where I learned a very strange and very deep truth about the world.

(The End)

Thy Name Is Sweet Potato [Part One]

I had arrived.

At last. At this place.

Qurian Town.

It couldn't quite be called run-down, but it was certainly not a large town, and it sat well off the main roads. The bare branches of the street trees swayed in the winter wind, making the whole place feel rather dreary.

But I needed to come here. I had no choice.

It all started about a month ago.

I had finished a small job in a certain town and was at a café terrace that afternoon, fork-to-mouth with a piece of cake, when the conversation at a nearby table drifted into my ears.

"...This cake is lovely, isn't it?"

"...About as good as George's place?"

"...Oh no, nowhere near that level."

Let me just establish, for the record: the cake at that café was not bad. In fact, by any reasonable measure, it was quite good. The sponge for the shortcake had proper flavor and fragrance, the fresh cream earned full marks in both taste and texture, the mont blanc made good use of chestnut flavor, and the fruit was neither overripe nor underripe.

But if someone was calling that merely "not as good as another place", what kind of establishment were they talking about?

Before I fully realized what I was doing, I had persuaded… no, pressured those customers into telling me exactly where that shop was.

If a place is supposedly that good, I have to go and eat there. Anything less would be an insult to my name as the genius sorceress Lina Inverse! Sorcery has nothing to do with it, but still!

And so here I was.

A town I never would have set foot in otherwise. But I'd gotten the name: George's Cake Shop. Named plainly after its owner, the shop was easy enough to find in a small town like this.

With a "Closed" sign on the door.

"Actually… someone stole my ingredients."

That was what the shop owner, George Goodluck, told me in a quiet, downcast voice after I went to ask what was going on and we'd introduced ourselves.

He was in his mid-to-late twenties, dressed in a white cook's uniform. His golden hair had a gentle wave to it, and while he was quite handsome, his expression now was dark and troubled.

We were in the kitchen at the back of the shop. The prep surfaces were cleared, the oven cold.

"Stolen?"

I perched on an empty wooden crate, because kitchens don't tend to have chairs, and echoed the word back at him.

"That's unusual. Would you mind telling me the details?"

"I don't mind. You know how much the quality of the final product depends on the ingredients. A pastry chef who doesn't control his ingredients all the way through isn't truly doing the job."

He was right. Some people think flour is flour and sugar is sugar; but just as different cuts of beef have entirely different flavors, flour and sugar vary tremendously depending on where they're grown and how they're processed.

"For ingredients I can't find ready-made, I grow them myself on my mountain."

"Your MOUNTAIN!!"

I couldn't help exclaiming at the casual scale of that statement.

He has a mountain?

"Yes. The climate and soil here suited what I needed, so I purchased a mountain with the right conditions."

"You purchased it."

He said that just as casually. Was he secretly wealthy?

"You put forward that level of commitment?!"

"Obviously!!"

He clenched his fist.

"An acceptable ingredient is easy enough to find if you look. But the perfect ingredient is another matter entirely! To settle for merely acceptable is to declare yourself a craftsman of limited ambition; and to simply wait and hope the perfect ingredient turns up someday is utterly out of the question! If the perfect ingredient doesn't exist, then you create it yourself. That is the bare minimum of what it means to have pride in your craft!"

…Wow…

I was speechless.

Given that level of dedication, I had to expect the finished product to be extraordinary.

"We should be offering a full chestnut-cake lineup right now, at this time of year," George continued.

I frowned slightly.

"Chestnuts? That's a bit out of season, isn't it?"

"Not for mine. I've done some selective breeding, so the harvest time is different from wild chestnuts. Besides, they need preparation time. If I'm going to use chestnuts with fruit wine, there's a difference between using fresh chestnuts and using ones that have been slowly soaking in liqueur for weeks."

"…I see."

I swallowed hard and forced myself to concentrate.

Buying a mountain. Selective breeding. The commitment of this man.

"...But…"

His tired eyes drifted somewhere distant.

"One day, just days before the optimal harvest time, I went to check on them, and every single chestnut was gone. Every last one, stolen."

"Every single one?!"

He nodded.

"There had been damage from insects and animals before. But an entire crop, overnight… that had to be deliberate."

"So you closed the shop."

"Yes. I'm sorry you came all this way for nothing. But even if it wasn't a deliberate theft, I still have the problem of…"

"Couldn't you make something else, though? A different cake?"

"Absolutely not! In any cuisine, using an ingredient at its absolute peak, the moment it has reached its best possible form, and elevating it to a finished product that transcends even that peak. That is what being a craftsman means. To serve something made without the seasonal ingredient, rather than wait, that is an act of watering things down, and I would sooner close the shop than compromise like that!"

He said it with complete conviction.

I considered it.

"So… when do you think you might reopen?"

"That depends on the motive behind the theft."

He stared at the kitchen floor.

"If they only wanted the chestnuts, or if I'm wrong and it was just animal damage, then there probably won't be a second incident. But if the intent was to harass me, and I have a feeling it might be, then the real problem is still coming.

My sweet potatoes will be ready to harvest in a few days. Two or three days at most before peak, and then a window of about ten days. If those are stolen too…"

"Then you don't know when you'll reopen. I understand."

He nodded.

"Keeping watch over the sweet potatoes is the obvious move. But one person has limits. I've been thinking about hiring someone to help…"

"Then let me do it."

I didn't miss the opening.

"You?"

He looked at me in surprise.

"Please wait. I appreciate the offer, but we don't know what kind of person we're dealing with. If there's a criminal here, they might get violent if we confront them. I can't ask a woman to…"

"It'll be completely fine," I said, puffing up a little.

"I can use attack spells too, you know."

"…Oh."

George's voice carried surprise, and somehow, worry.

"I mean, I'd need you not to actually use fire or ice attack spells in the field."

"…Oh."

That was me this time.

"Rapid temperature change could destroy the sweet potatoes. And obviously anything that disrupts the soil is out of the question. Even wind spells that might damage leaves are to be avoided — damaged leaves divert the plant's energy to healing itself and subtly reduce the potato's flavor. Protecting the

crop is the objective, after all. If catching the criminal comes at the cost of the crop quality, that defeats the entire purpose."

Which meant… most of my spells were off the table?

George's expression clouded as I hesitated.

"—No, it's fine," I said quickly, putting on a smile and waving it off.

"I can also use a sword. Not at a professional level, but enough to handle a typical thug. One or two petty thieves are no problem. And you don't have time to go find a bodyguard from scratch, do you? If the sweet potatoes get taken in the meantime, what's the point?"

"That's… true. Though honestly, in terms of what I can pay…"

"Also fine. My goal isn't money, it's delicious cake."

George looked down and thought for a moment.

Then, slowly, he raised his face.

"—Understood. Lady Lina, I'll be counting on you. Can you start today? I'll be on watch as well, of course. The harvest window is probably starting in a few days, and lasting at most ten days. Until we either protect the potatoes or catch the culprit, along with a modest token of thanks, I can offer cake."

"Deal. And when we catch the culprit and the sweet potatoes are safe, I expect something wonderful."

I gave him a wink.

Even though most of the trees had already shed their leaves, the sweet potato field on George's mountain was still blazing with vivid green.

"…Sweet potatoes…?"

I frowned slightly at the plants when he showed me the field partway up the mountain on the outskirts of town.

…The leaves look… subtly different from the sweet potato plants I'm used to…

"I mentioned I've done selective breeding," George said, hearing my murmur.

"Everything growing here is a sweet potato I created and cultivated myself. The chestnuts were the same. Whatever the reason and whoever did it, I won't tolerate anyone trampling what I've made."

"Well, making them answer for it comes after we catch them. So…"

I looked around. A gently sloping hillside cleared into a large field, surrounded by mixed woodland.

I pointed to one section of the trees.

"For the watch post, over there, on the uphill side of the wood. Pitch a tent and take turns."

"The uphill side?"

"Yes. We want to protect the sweet potatoes, but ideally we catch the culprit too. Otherwise, if their motive is a grudge. We haven't fixed the underlying problem, so the next crop might be targeted. So we want them not to know we're watching, then catch them in the act.

You said the whole chestnut crop was gone in one night, so the culprits are probably multiple people with a cart. They wouldn't have crossed over the mountain with a loaded cart, so they're approaching from the base of the hill or from the sides. Hence, we watch from the uphill side of the wood."

"That makes sense. We'll want dark-colored tent fabric. That way any warmth inside won't be visible."

"Right. We won't be able to see out through it either, so we'll peek out occasionally with the flap barely open."

George smiled and shook his head.

"We won't need to do that. If even one sweet potato is pulled up, we'll know immediately."

"How?"

"It will scream."

"What will."

"The sweet potato."

…

For a full moment, the meaning of that sentence did not connect.

"…Excuse me… scream… the sweet potato…?"

"When it's pulled from the ground."

"I… that's not… a sweet potato, is it? In my non-professional opinion."

"It is absolutely a sweet potato. Selective breeding, as I said. Taste and fragrance were what I was pursuing, and this was simply an incidental result. That's all there is to it."

"Incidentally."

"Don't worry. Hearing the scream won't kill you."

He said that cheerfully. Then, with a suddenly thoughtful expression —

"…Actually, if I bred them to kill anyone who heard the scream, I'd have a natural trap… but the flavor balance would be…"

"Um. So. What exactly did you crossbreed these with to get—"

I stopped myself.

I decided I didn't want to know. If I found out what the original ingredients were, I might not be able to eat the cake.

George gave a slightly amused smile at my hesitation.

"I expect you're wondering because you're a sorceress."

Most non-sorceresses would wonder about this too. The raw materials of your cake are screaming root vegetables.

"Actually, my father was a sorcerer. I was enrolled in the Sorcerers' Guild as a child and studied all sorts of things there, but I ended up going into this field instead. The knowledge of plants and animals I gained there was what I used for the selective breeding. And I've been adding various things to the soil in this field as well."

"…Various things…"

I could feel my expression getting strained.

George continued, completely cheerful.

"The soil amendments are a trade secret. Let's just call it 'mystery substance applied to the ground' and leave it there."

"Saying it like that makes it sound even more suspicious."

"You'll be fine! More importantly, let's start getting ready for the watch. We'll need to go back to town first. The mountain gets dark quickly once the sun starts going down."

"…R-right…"

Maybe I would have been better off not knowing any of this…

With a vaguely unsettled feeling, I nodded anyway.

The mountain at night is cold. It's a phrase you often hear, but only those who've experienced it know the full weight of it.

The black tent was pitched in the mixed woodland. Even through the double layer of thick fabric, the cold of the night seeped in, steady and relentless. A single small lamp served as both light and heat. We lay on a sheet spread over the ground, wrapped in blankets, and only then could we hold the cold at bay.

"…Do you think they'll come? The culprit?"

George whispered.

"If they're going to come, let them come quickly and get it over with."

I answered from beneath my blanket cocoon.

This was not a pleasant working environment by any definition. If I had to do this night after night, I was going to freeze to death. And if it turned out the culprit only wanted the chestnuts and was never coming back at all, that would be truly depressing.

"Agreed."

George smiled wryly

…GYAAAAAAAAASREEEEE!!

A piercing shriek split the night.

Oh!

We looked at each other, nodded and doused the lamp and crawled out of the tent.

Cold air hit my face like a knife. Darkness closed in around us. With our eyes still adjusted to lamplight it was almost impossible to see.

The only lights in the sky were the paper-thin crescent moon and the distant scatter of stars. Barely anything.

And before us, the earth. Dark.

In the utter blackness, all I could hear was the rustle of the sweet potato leaves.

…GYAAAAAAAAASREEEEE!!

Another shriek. From the sweet potatoes.

Let's set aside the philosophical question of whether something that screams can properly be called a sweet potato.

As my eyes slowly adjusted to the dark, The field was full of moving shadows.

I lost the ability to speak. George beside me was equally speechless.

The shadows were small. Very small.

Not children, the height was about right for a four or five-year-old, but the silhouette was closer to a monkey than a person. Though not quite like any monkey I knew, either. Certainly no monkey around here should have enormous ear-like protrusions on either side of its head.

"What… are those…?"

George's voice was barely a whisper

…CRASH.

And at the sound of it, the creatures froze.

In the darkness, reflecting the faint light of moon and stars, dozens of eyes turned to look at us at once.

GIIIIIIIIII!!

They let out a warning shriek. Several nearby leaped toward us!

George stumbled back, and my spell was just in time!

"Shadow Snap!!"

In daylight, a void-like darkness would have been visible expanding through the air. Here, the darkness of the spell melded with the surrounding night — and swallowed the leaping creatures, reducing them to ash in an instant.

Then …

"Light!"

A burst of magical light came from George.

POP.

Like a sound made of pure brightness, the light exploded outward.

GIIII!?

Eyes burned by the sudden glare, the creatures cried out,"What the…!?"

George cried out too.

Of course you'd be surprised at your own spell.

I alone had thought to cover my eyes before the spell activated, so I avoided the worst of the flash, but even without looking directly at it, I was dazzled.

The lit-up potato field showed creatures writhing on top of it. Grey-bodied things about the size of a monkey, with pointed oversized ears on either side of their faces and strangely large eyes and mouths.

I had never seen anything like them. That could only mean one thing; they were a chimera, some kind of synthetically created hybrid organism.

Several of the creatures were clutching something that squirmed and writhed in their hands.

"Oh…! No!!"

George had recovered his sight. His voice rose at the sight of whatever the creatures were holding.

"My sweet potatoes!!"

"Those are them?!"

They writhe and scream? You're really going to make cake from these? Every time I see these things in their natural state, my appetite for the cake dwindles a little more.

But regardless…

The creatures looked at each other in momentary confusion

…KII!

One of them let out a sharp cry, and then all at once they turned and bolted!

They're running!

I started chanting, "Fly!!"

I launched into the air on the flight spell!

But I realized its uselessness almost immediately.

The only open area was the field itself. Beyond it, nothing but dense woodland and darkness. In these conditions, tracking small fast creatures by sight was impossible. And running on foot, I couldn't catch them.

"…Damn…"

I gave up the chase after covering almost no distance. I cancelled the spell and landed.

All I could do was stare into the darkness where the creatures had disappeared.

"What… were those things…?"

The next morning, George stood in the now-lit sweet potato field, staring at the direction the creatures had fled.

"Probably magically created chimeras of some kind," I said, my gaze following his.

"Which means someone with magic ability is directing them."

"But why would a sorcerer…"

"No idea. It's possible the plants you bred, the chestnuts, and the sweet potatoes, happened to be exactly what they needed for some magical purpose."

"I see… I suppose there could be any number of reasons. The real problem, then…"

I scanned the field.

Last night's damage was limited. Which meant…

"There's a real chance they'll be back."

"If it comes to that again, honestly, can we do something about that many of them?"

"It'll be difficult, regardless of what approach we take.

You could wipe them out with a sufficiently powerful attack spell, but that would damage your sweet potatoes too. Hiring a lot of people to help can't decisively stop all of them, and a crowd moving around in the field will trample it.

Which means…"

"There's no option?"

He looked deflated. I shook my head.

"Don't jump to conclusions. I mean that if they come back to this field again, the options are limited. But,"

He raised his head.

"They might not come back?"

"Not exactly. I mean there's a different approach."

I held up one finger.

"We find their base and go to them."

"Can you do that?!"

"I think so."

I looked in the direction the chimeras had fled.

Beyond it was another mountain.

"They ran that way, into an area with no town, no village. So somewhere in that direction, probably not too far, is wherever they operate from. The base of the sorcerer who controls them; a laboratory or something."

It wasn't unusual for a sorcerer to work in an isolated location in the wilderness.

"Before nightfall, before they come back to this field, we find their location and hit it.

That's probably the only way to resolve this at the root."

"Understood! Then let me come with you! Two pairs of eyes are better than one, and besides, this is my problem too."

He looked at me with firm resolve. I nodded silently.

The search turned out not to be easy.

Had there been snow on the ground, it might have been different. But the mountain was covered in dry fallen leaves, which left no trace of the chimeras' passage.

I flew aerial searches with the flight spell, circling the area where they'd fled. I found nothing.

The sun rose, reached its peak, and began its descent.

Was I looking in entirely the wrong direction?

"Lady Lina!!"

George called out.

He was crouching on the pathless ground, picking something up.

"What is it?!"

"Look at this!!"

He held out his palm for me to see as I ran over.

Resting on it was something like an eyeball. The white was an off-brown, cloudy color. The pupil lacked any clarity — it looked exactly like the eye of something dead for several days.

Deeply unsettling in appearance, I drew back slightly.

"What IS that?!"

"It's one of my chestnuts!"

"A CHESTNUT?!"

"Please don't make that face. I bred for flavor and fragrance, and this shape was a natural result."

George looked mildly irritated.

"Besides, once you get used to it, they're actually quite cute in their own way."

They are not cute. Not even slightly.

George looked into the pathless forest ahead.

"Anyway, the point is, one of the chestnuts that was previously stolen is lying here. Which means the chimeras passed through this spot. Which means the direction we've been searching was correct!!"

"Then…!!"

Encouraged by this evidence, we pressed on.

And before long, on the mountainside ahead of us, we discovered what appeared to be an entrance to some kind of ruins; a gap opening in the rock face!

(Thy Name Is Sweet Potato — to be continued!)

Next time: Lina and company have found the culprit's hideout! But what waits inside?!

In any case, the author has recently realized that this "next time preview" section never actually previews anything. Whatever shall be done about this?

Well, setting that aside, next up: Thy Name Is Sweet Potato, Part Two!

Wrap a sweet potato in foil and steam it while you wait!

Thy Name Is Sweet Potato [Part Two]

Story so far: Lina came to the mountain town of Qurian in search of legendary cake. But the shop was closed — the owner George told her the specialty chestnuts she'd bred through selective breeding had been stolen, and the sweet potatoes she'd grown were at risk of the same. For the sake of cake, Lina agreed to help solve the theft. Staking out the sweet potato field, Lina and George were confronted by a swarm of monkey-sized chimeras. They drove them off, and following the chimeras' trail — including a stolen chestnut shaped like a dead eyeball — they discovered the entrance to ruins deep in the mountains!

"—Is this… the place…?"

George murmured with uncertainty, the fading evening light painting his profile in pale amber.

The sun was already going down. The temperature had dropped enough that standing without a cloak was chilly.

The entrance was not large — adults would have to duck and go single file. But its depth was impossible to guess.

Looking closely, weeds growing near the entrance were broken here and there. Something had been coming and going — though whether it was the chimeras from last night, impossible to say.

"Either way, we have to go in and confirm it."

I started murmuring the light spell —

And stopped.

Something was coming. From inside. A distant sound, like a buzzing — growing louder. Getting closer.

"Get back!"

I pushed George back and pressed myself to the side of the entrance, chanting quietly.

Peering in: at first, only darkness. Then, as a faint light seeped in — shapes appeared. The monkey-sized creatures. The chimeras from the night before!

Bull's-eye. This is their entrance.

I dove out from cover, crossed in front of the entrance as they emerged, and released the spell I'd prepared!

"Fireball!!"

KABOOM!

The blast detonated in the tunnel's mouth, scattering fire and heat. The shockwave blew chimeras and flame alike out of the opening in a spectacular burst.

When the echo died, I stepped back in front of the entrance. Beneath the lingering rumble, I could hear dozens of tiny footsteps retreating rapidly.

Surviving chimeras were running.

The one directing them would know something had gone wrong soon. Given time, they'd prepare a counterattack — or escape.

Either way: no good. We go now.

I drew my shortsword and cast the light spell.

"Light!"

Steady magical light bloomed at the tip of the blade. Not bright as noon, but enough to see by.

"Let's go."

At my signal, George swallowed and nodded.

"…Right."

And so, with the glowing sword as our torch, the two of us stepped inside.

Rather than any labyrinthine corridors full of traps and branching paths that might lead to dramatic tension, the tunnel turned out to be relatively straightforward — and we soon found ourselves at a large chamber inside.

Well, that made sense. If the tunnel were full of traps, the chimeras would be the first victims.

The chamber was wide and tall, with magical lights burning at various points along the walls. A door stood open on the far side. No chimeras in sight.

"…What is this place…"

George was looking around when —

"—Well done, making it this far!!"

A heavy male voice resonated through the space.

Beyond the open door — a small light and footsteps — slowly approaching.

A man, carrying a lamp-like object enchanted with magical light, suspended from his hip.

Black hair, black robe melting into shadow, only a white face floating in the air.

He looked to be in his forties. His features were fine, but the hollowed cheeks and sharp gaze gave him an unapproachable air.

He emerged from the corridor and stopped just inside the room, a small smile playing on his lips.

"Well, first phase — passed, I'd say."

"Passed? What do you mean?"

"W-wait—"

George's voice came out strained beside me.

"What — is going on — Father?!"

…

After a full beat, I spun to face George.

"Hold on. Father?!"

"I told you my father was a sorcerer."

George kept his eyes fixed on the man, voice tight. I did vaguely remember hearing something like that.

"And you are?"

The black-robed man turned his gaze to me.

"I'm Lina — Lina Inverse. A traveling sorceress. I came to George's shop to eat cake, and when I found out his ingredients had been stolen, I agreed to help find the culprit."

"What?!"

The man's eyes flew wide.

"It was a chestnut?! That thing?!"

Well, most people wouldn't guess it was a chestnut from something that looks like a days-old eyeball.

"…I see. George had assistance. Forgive the delay. My name is Ginith Goodluck. George's father."

"But Father—! So you knew it was my chestnuts and my sweet potatoes, and you deliberately had those chimeras steal them?!"

"I didn't know they were chestnuts. But I did know they were yours.

Though frankly, I'm not sure you have grounds to call my chimeras strange when you're making chestnuts that look like that.

Are you actually planning to serve those to people?"

"That's beside the point!! Why did you take my chestnuts?!"

George ignored his father's entirely reasonable point and pushed back angrily.

Ginith shook his head slightly.

"You don't understand, George. This is a trial — one I am giving you as your father."

"…A trial…?"

"Yes. I had you enrolled in the Sorcerers' Guild to raise you as a sorcerer. But you chose pastry instead. I won't criticize that choice — you clearly thought it through carefully. However, I need to see with my own eyes exactly how much you've built in the path you chose. And if I judge you to be lacking in ability — I will force you to give up this path. As your father."

"…So this 'trial' is what this is…"

"Yes. I created chimeras and used them to steal your… chestnuts… first. The first test: whether you could find this place."

"This was lying nearby," George said, producing the eyeball-shaped chestnut he'd found.

"I knew immediately. Nothing else like this grows around here."

"The selective breeding produced this shape, and that shape became the key to finding this location. First test: passed," George said.

Ginith made a small, quiet sound that might have been a laugh.

"Don't get complacent, George. I said 'first' test. And you found this place with Lady Lina's help. Finding it through someone else's assistance is hardly a pass in itself."

Father and son. The air between them practically crackled.

"…Excuse me, Ginith — I have a question."

I interjected into the charged moment.

"What is it?"

"If the point was to test how much George had grown, wouldn't it make more sense to just… have him make cake and taste it?"

"I don't like sweets."

"THAT'S YOUR REASON?!"

"Quite so, George!" Ginith pivoted away from my retort and addressed his son.

"On to the second trial!!"

"Bring it!!"

George said it with energy and momentum. …Was that wise?

"That's the spirit, my son!!"

Ginith reached into his robe and produced something small, put it to his lips and blew.

The sound that came out was just wind. But —

From beyond the open door at the back came the rapid patter of dozens of tiny feet. And then from the darkness into the light — a wave of chimeras poured forth.

Thirty, forty — maybe more.

"Second trial!! Defeat all of these chimeras!!"

"A-all of them?!"

George looked shaken. But —

"There's no need to panic," I said.

I tapped him on the shoulder and stepped forward.

"I'll clean this up."

My reasons were obvious. After everything we'd been through together, "sorry, George didn't pass the test, so no more cakes" was not an outcome I was prepared to accept.

"W-wait!! This is George's trial—"

"I know," I said, cutting Ginith off.

"And I decided that his cake is worth lending my strength to. So my strength is, in effect, his. That's a more sensible arrangement than sending chimeras after him because you don't like sweets."

"Mmph… very well…"

He looked pained at being called out, but conceded.

"My conditions: 'defeat' is enough — if any run or hide, I'll count them as defeated from loss of will. And you might want to step back. This could get messy."

Under my cloak, I began to move my hands and chant.

Ginith, sorcerer that he was, recognized an attack spell being charged. He changed color and dove to one side.

"It's the woman! Pin her down — don't let her finish the incantation!!"

GYAA!!

The chimeras shrieked and launched themselves at the ground together.

Fast! But —

WHOOSH.

I spun and hurled my cloak — unfastened from its clasp — out toward them like a net.

The cloak cut off sightlines for a fraction of a second. The lead chimeras, carried by momentum, plowed into it and got tangled. The ones behind tried to leap over them —

By then I had already stepped far back, and I was done chanting.

I pressed my palm to the floor and released the Word of Power.

"Freeze Rope!!"

White spiraling tendrils extended from my hand in every direction, avoiding only the ground where I stood.

The moment the chimeras touched them — the frost seized their bodies and turned them to ice sculptures.

But not all of them. Many had leaped back just in time, outside the effect radius.

"Hmm… impressive."

Ginith narrowed his eyes.

"Then witness the true form of my chimeras!!"

He raised the silent whistle again. The chimeras converged, moving as one.

Their bodies twisted, melted, merged —

ROOAAARRR!!

What rose up was a chimera with an animal's head, nearly twice human height, and six arms.

"Behold!! My fusion-composite chimera — Duplex — in his true form!!"

His voice rang with pride.

…A fusion chimera! A being of that technical complexity… he was not merely a man who disliked sweets!

"Now go, Duplex!! Show them your true power!!"

At his command, the chimera drew back all six massive arms —

"So anyway — Freeze Squall."

CRRRRRASH—BOOM.

My spell froze it solid. It shattered.

"I-IMPOSSIBLE!! MY DUPLEX—!!"

"Look, merging is impressive, but if that makes you bigger and slower and easier to hit, what's the point."

To be honest, fighting it as individuals with numbers and speed would have been a lot more dangerous for me. But —

"Besides, when you go to all the trouble of creating a special ability, you want to use it! That's only natural! And normally your opponent is supposed to play along and act scared and get into danger a little!!"

"Sorry. I don't do that."

I told him bluntly.

Also, his buildup speech gave me plenty of time to charge the spell.

"You— you—!! THEN!!"

He drew himself up and turned those sharp eyes on me once more.

"Third trial, here we go!!"

"There's a third?!"

He strode to a wall, grabbed a lit candelabra and pulled it.

With a deep grinding sound, the wall beside it slid open sideways, revealing a black void beyond.

"Come forth!! My chimera — Myuraxis!!"

A moaning sound, like the cry of a spirit in a windswept graveyard, preceded the thing's slow approach.

"—Yikes."

I couldn't help the sound that came out of me.

The creature was roughly human in size and build. But from head to toe, its ashen grey surface was covered — almost entirely — in eyes. Dozens of them. Hundreds. Dulled, cloudy pupils that reflected nothing and held no will — staring blankly into space.

Grotesque in appearance, to put it mildly.

I started to chant —

"Please wait, Lady Lina!!"

And George stopped me.

"Don't!! No attack spells!!"

"…What?"

I stopped — confused — but stopped.

George kept his eyes fixed on the unsettling chimera.

"Look closely!! At the… visible parts of it!!

Every one of those things is one of my stolen chestnuts!!"

"WHAT?!"

In a variety of ways, I was speechless.

Looking again at those foggy eyes — or eye-like things — they did closely resemble George's chestnuts. Not that I felt any particular desire to look closely.

"Impressive, isn't it!!" Ginith's victorious voice rang out.

"Correct!! This chimera was built using the chestnuts taken from your property! I made no modifications to the chestnuts themselves. Which means, in theory, you could recover them all. But if you destroy this chimera with an attack spell, the chestnuts are destroyed too.

This chimera is not as powerful as Duplex was — but what will you do?!"

What will I do…

My own position was clear. I had no intention of eating cake made from chestnuts recovered from inside that horror.

But before I could start chanting —

"Then I'll handle this myself."

George stepped forward.

"—Hold on!! Even if it's not as strong as that last one, weak doesn't mean harmless!!"

I, who had just effortlessly demolished the supposedly fearsome Duplex, was saying this. And George was a pastry chef. What exactly was he planning?

But he smiled — cool, confident.

"Don't worry."

He turned to face his father.

"You made a strategic error, Father."

"What?!"

George reached into his jacket pocket, rummaged, and produced a small vial, which he held up in his right hand.

Through the blue glass, the hint of a dark liquid could be seen.

"What are you going to do with that?"

"This."

George pulled the stopper with his left hand and gave the vial a small shake.

The liquid moved — and faintly, a scent began to drift through the wide room.

Not a pleasant smell, not an unbearable one. Something in between.

And at that instant —

The hundred-eyed chimera shuddered.

Ginith's expression flickered.

The chimera's body began to convulse violently —

"George!! What did you do?!"

"You shouldn't have used my chestnuts unchanged, Father."

He gave the vial another small shake.

"Food ingredients are living things. Even plants. And what I have in this vial is the fertilizer I give to my crops. They want it. Watch."

At the moment he pointed with his eyes —

BLOPP!

The chimera's body erupted. From within it, dozens of eyeballs — "chestnuts" — burst free, rolling toward George in a hungry rush.

"There."

George stoppered the vial. The chestnuts lost the scent, milled about in confusion, and soon stopped moving.

What remained of the chimera without its chestnuts was a formless ashen lump.

George picked up several of the chestnuts and examined them, then turned to me with a warm smile.

"Good — no loss of quality. I can make a marron cake for you after all, Lady Lina."

I don't want it.

Even if the quality is undamaged, the backstory is more than enough to put me off.

"…I-impossible… even Myuraxis this easily…!!"

Ginith muttered in disbelief.

"Then!! Fourth trial!! Next is—! …Um…"

"Hold on a moment," I cut in.

"What's with the 'um'? Just how many trials are there? Don't tell me you're just making these up as you go because you desperately want to force George back into magic."

"What?! N-no!! Of course not!!"

He turned red and started stammering.

Right.

"Is that it, Father?!"

"I — it's not — FINE!!"

He turned and fled through the back door.

"George! After him!!"

"Hm? But the chestnuts are recovered…"

"If we leave your father alone, he'll just cause trouble again! We have to catch him and have a proper talk!!"

"I — that's true! Right—"

And he immediately began chanting a spell.

He rattled off unfamiliar incantations at speed —

"Earth Bind."

One firm stomp of the right foot —

A distant crash came from the depths of the corridor.

"…That was…?"

"My spell should have caught him."

George said it casually, and walked ahead.

He'd learned the basic principles of the Chaos Language at the Sorcerers' Guild and independently composed this spell.

I found myself thinking: constructing original spells from the Chaos Language fundamentals is a fairly advanced level of sorcery. No wonder Ginith had been reluctant to let this talent go to pastry.

And sure enough — a short way down the corridor, Ginith was completely wrapped from head to toe in thick tendrils of earth.

—

And now, in front of me: a full array of cakes.

Pies, tarts, sponge cakes, pound cakes. Every one of them made by George from the recovered "chestnuts" and early-harvested "sweet potatoes."

The appearance was flawless. The cream and mousse were glossy and well-shaped; the bake on the crust was perfect. The scent was sweet and gently intoxicating.

Just looking at them made my mouth water.

But.

The raw materials were those things.

There are things in life it is better not to know. If I hadn't known what the ingredients were, I would have lunged straight at them.

But I knew.

The chestnuts in their current form on these cakes bore no resemblance to cloudy eyeballs. The sweet potato pie neither wriggled nor screamed. And yet.

"Please, Lady Lina. Help yourself."

George smiled in his apron.

"…O-oh… well then…"

My right hand hovered over the table for a long moment before it picked up a teacup and took a sip.

…The aroma. The flavor. The natural sweetness of the leaves drawn out without too much bitterness or astringency.

A perfect brew.

…And in this way I managed to avoid the issue via fine tea appreciation.

"I WON'T EAT THAT STUFF!!"

The outburst came not from me, but from Ginith — bound to a chair in the corner. We had dragged him back to town from the mountains, per George's

insistence that the only way to convince his father was to make him eat the cake. Now he was hogtied in the room where the cakes had been laid out.

—Oh! Right!

"Well, with that going on in the corner, I can't eat in peace," I said with a glance at Ginith.

"So let's have him eat first and get the 'convincing' done, and then I can eat properly."

"That makes sense."

George took a plate of chestnut pound cake and walked over to his father.

"Eat up, Father."

Go for it, old man. If you eat it and survive, I'll eat too.

Ginith struggled and protested — "Who would— I told you I don't like sweets— I— MMPH!?"

He had a piece of cake shoved in his mouth mid-sentence. He grimaced, started to spit it out — and then his expression changed.

He chewed with a puzzled look. Swallowed.

"Not quite so sickeningly sweet as all that, is it?" George said, smiling.

"…Hmm… well… it wasn't entirely unpalatable," Ginith said with deliberate grumpiness.

"Then have another bite, to get a fuller sense of it."

More cake was offered — and astonishingly, Ginith opened his mouth voluntarily this time.

He's eating. He's actually eating!

The man who claimed to dislike sweets, who had set all this up because he wanted his son to be a sorcerer, and who knew full well what the raw ingredients looked like — was eating!

One cake led to another, and another, and eventually Ginith had worked his way through everything on offer.

"…Hmm. George. It seems the path you chose… was not entirely mistaken."

He allowed a small smirk to appear at one corner of his cream-smeared mouth.

"Father?!"

"I will stop trying to stop you. Master this path of yours to its fullest."

"Thank you! Father!!"

…He won his father over with cake. Which means… this really is that good?

Trying to look calm while my heart churned with hope and anxiety, I said:

"It seems like that's finally resolved."

"Yes. Thank you, Lady Lina — this is all because of you!"

"In that case — I think it's finally time for me to have some cake."

I drew a slice of marron cream sponge toward me, took a silver fork, and had a bite.

…

It was not delicious.

To call this "delicious" would be an obscenity and a disservice to the cake.

Exquisite? Yes — exactly. The cream was smooth, silky, meltingly soft, drawing out the chestnut's flavor and fragrance to their full depth. The sponge wrapped around the tongue with the softest, most pillowy resistance, and the balance of sweetness — and then much later —

"…De… licious…"

Those were the only words I managed to produce — after I had, in a trance, gone through every variety on offer.

Goodness.

By this point, any distaste I'd had for the eyeball chestnuts and screaming sweet potatoes had entirely evaporated. In fact, I found myself actively grateful to them.

This really was what the rumors said — and far, far beyond the rumors.

"I'm delighted it met with your approval," George said, smiling warmly.

And then he committed the fatal error of saying those words.

"There's plenty more, so please have as much as you like."

Well, I had no reason to refuse. I smiled back at him.

"In that case, I'll gladly take you up on that."

He didn't know. He didn't yet know how much I could eat when truly motivated.

And so my personal all-you-can-eat cake session began.

If you want truly delicious cake, come to the mountain town.

Qurian Town. George's Cake Shop should be there waiting for you.

If the shop happens to be closed —

…I'm sorry. It might possibly be my fault.

(Thy Name Is Sweet Potato — The End, Apparently)

Slayers Side Story: What the Blade Sees

He drew the sword.

The polished silver blade caught the brilliant sunlight and reflected back the blue of sea and sky.

It was not a dull blade — but it was not a legendary masterpiece either. Not the blade itself.

The young swordsman's eyes were fixed not on the blade but on the hilt, which was decorated with a distinctive ornament.

Various thoughts passed through the young man's mind.

If only this thing didn't exist—

On an impulse, he swung back his arm to hurl the sword into the sea —

"...Are you going to throw it away? What a waste."

The voice came from right beside him.

"....!?"

He spun reflexively. The motion sent his long blond hair streaming in the salt wind.

Kurusida Village. A small fishing village with nothing particular to recommend it except that it faced the sea.

At the jetty: several unmanned small boats and a fisherman.

"Got a grudge against that sword?"

The fisherman said it without looking up from the line dangling into the water.

A strange man.

[1]His clothes: shirt, jacket, trousers, boots; were utterly ordinary. Long black hair, a face handsome enough to be mistaken for a woman's. His age was hard to place: he looked roughly the same as the young swordsman standing before him, or could have been much older.

An unlit cigarette in the corner of his mouth was about the only stylish touch, undermined by the cheap fishing rod in his hand.

The young man hesitated… then spoke.

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[1] This is Lina's Father.

"Your cigarette… it's not lit."

"I know. Trying to quit. The wife and kids back home hate it."

For someone with such a striking face, the voice was rough and casual.

"…Wife and kids… you have a family?"

"My age is beside the point. So, you gonna throw that sword away or not?"

"None of your business."

The young man said bluntly, then added:

"Just so you know, I won't give it to you if you ask."

"I'm not asking.

…Fair enough, it's none of my business. What happens between you and that sword. Whether someone picks it up and kills ten people with it. Whether you hold onto it and save ten people with it. None of my business."

"…Then what are you trying to say?"

"Nothing much.

I used to do mercenary work… done with it now. Back then my rule was: a craftsman who doesn't care about his tools is second-rate, but a craftsman who takes out his frustrations on his tools is below third-rate.

Old habits of sticking my nose in where it doesn't belong, I suppose."

"……"

"Anyway. Never mind me.

Throw that sword into the sea if you like. If it gets all that's weighing on you off your chest and clears your mind, then go ahead."

The young man stood in silence for a long moment. Then he sheathed the sword.

"What's your name?"

"Come on, now. Didn't anyone ever teach you? When you ask someone's name, introduce yourself first?"

"I'm Gourry. Gourry Gabriev."

"Good boy. Honest, too. But just so you know, just because you give your name doesn't mean the other person has to give theirs. That's how the world works."

"…What's that supposed to mean?"

Gourry gave a small shrug, having realized he was being teased, and turned to walk away.

Only the sound of the waves remained.

It was unusual to have two visitors in a day.

This was a small fishing village off the main road. People passed through occasionally, but most walked straight through without stopping to rest.

Today, two had stopped.

One was a lone traveler of unclear background, fine enough, as such things go. But the other was more interesting: a traveling mercenary, by the look of him.

Given that, how would they act?

A mistake here could cost something. But that was its own kind of entertainment.

He wanted his guests to put up a good fight.

Just imagining it, he almost laughed.

"Hmm?"

The man murmured and stopped.

His black hair stirred in the breeze.

In this narrow land sandwiched between sea and mountains, the sun vanished behind the peaks early. By now the beach was almost fully dark, with no other figures about.

The man had left his fishing spot early and was headed back to the inn when he felt a gaze.

Following the sensation: a small, ramshackle hut that seemed to have no particular purpose. Standing in the last of the western light like a dark smudge.

He walked toward it. He tapped the reed mat over the entrance up with his fishing rod.

Inside: only a few pieces of junk and a damp darkness.

The man lost interest and turned back toward the village.

The small inn's first-floor dining room smelled of fish.

It was nearly dinnertime, but there was only one customer. Well, no one would go out of their way to eat here. The menu was a handful of fresh-fish dishes and some pre-made stew. The locals could do as well at home.

More of a side project for whoever owned the large house, half hobby, half supplementary income.

The light coming through the open doors and windows was already a deep amber, deepening the establishment's already rundown atmosphere.

That one customer was Gourry.

His meal, ordered a while ago, had still not arrived. The woman running the place was handling service, cooking, and everything else alone, so complaining seemed unreasonable.

"Looks boring."

The voice came from the side, the same voice he'd heard at the beach.

"…You again…"

Gourry said it without turning, chin still propped on his hand.

The black-haired man, still with the unlit cigarette, sat down across from him and glanced at the sword leaning against the table.

"Didn't throw it after all."

"Leave me alone. And why do you have to sit here? There are other seats."

"Don't say that. Food tastes better with company, everyone knows that."

"For someone so stylish, you're awfully lonely."

"Maybe."

He brushed off Gourry's jab without reaction, a faint self-deprecating smile on his face.

"Used to be fine on my own. But now I'm hopeless. Got used to the noise of family life, took a trip alone for the first time in years on some excuse or another. I got bored almost immediately. Too proud to go back right away, so I wandered around for a while. And in this village I met you, with that 'I have so many problems' face plastered on for all to see."

"I'm your entertainment then."

"More or less.

You're one of the more blatant sufferers I've met in a while. I couldn't help myself."

"Anyone has problems."

"True enough."

The black-haired man leaned forward slightly and lowered his voice.

"But as one man to another, one piece of advice. Don't ever let someone you're in love with see you making that face."

"WHAT?!"

Gourry's face changed color. He waved his hands frantically.

"I… I'm not in love with you!!"

"Of course you're not, you fool!! No one said that!!"

"But the way you said it…"

"I'm saying, don't make that miserable face in public, especially in front of someone you care about!! That's what I said from the beginning!!"

"…Oh. If you meant that, you should have said that from the start."

"I DID SAY THAT FROM THE START!! Are you just naturally dense?!"

"Dense… well… anyway, you…"

Gourry broke off.

His gaze went to the entrance of the inn.

Three men stood there, watching him and the black-haired man.

"You're… a traveling swordsman?"

The one who spoke was an old man with white hair and beard. His eyes met Gourry's, prompting the question.

"…Yeah… why?"

"Actually… we have a matter we'd like to discuss with you. Would you be willing to listen over a meal?"

Gourry hesitated briefly.

"…I can listen, at least…"

"Thank you."

The old man bowed deeply and went briefly to the kitchen, exchanged a few words with the woman there, then returned.

"I'll see to the meal."

He sat down across from Gourry and the two other men took up positions nearby.

"So? What is it?"

"…Yes. I am the village headman here, Kyle Bunitz."

At Gourry's urging, the old man began to speak, his words coming out slowly.

"……I'm not sure where or how to begin…… it's a difficult thing to talk about……"

Just as he said this, the landlady brought the food on a tray and placed it in front of Gourry and the black-haired man. It was a very standard set meal: salad, soup, bread, and boiled fish.

"……Ah, please, go ahead and eat. We're happy to talk while you dine. Now, go ahead."

"……Is that so?"

At his urging, Gourry and the black-haired man picked up their forks. Seeing this, the village head continued.

"……What should I say…… actually, for some time now, our village has been suffering from trouble……"

"Hmm."

Gourry gave a polite acknowledgment while scarfing down a salad containing seaweed. The black-haired man, while gnawing on bread, stared at the village head in silence.

"This village…… is surrounded by mountains and sea. Some go out to sea to fish, while others hunt in the mountains to make a living."

"I see."

Gourry's fork moved to the boiled fish.

"──Sorry to interrupt the story, but wait."

The voice that brought all movement and conversation to a halt was that of the black-haired man. It wasn't a strong tone, but there was something compelling about it. He turned his face to Gourry.

"I'll give you a heads-up: don't touch that boiled fish. It's got some strange drug in it."

"What……!?"

The ones who turned pale were the village head and his cronies.

"Wha…… what are you talking about, that's ridiculous……!?"

The black-haired man gave a sarcastic smile to the village head, whose face had indeed turned completely pale.

"It's weird. The timing of the food coming out, for one. And then, the smell of this boiled fish. Is this poison from a Borji sea snake? You turned pale the moment I mentioned it—that's the clincher. If you insist it's not, why don't you try eating it? You, yourself?"

"──Damn it!"

One of the cronies groaned and lunged forward. His target was Gourry's sword, leaning against the table. However, Gourry grabbed the sword first, and as he stood up, he struck the back of the crony's head with the scabbard.

"Gah!?"

The man groaned and crawled onto the floor.

"What is the meaning of this!?"

To Gourry's question, the village head revealed his inner turmoil on his face.

"……It’s for the sake of the village…… please forgive me……"

"Forgive you, you idiot!"

Crash!

"Ugh!"

With a shout, the black-haired man kicked the table, which struck the village head squarely in the face.

"The people at the inn are in on it too! We’re going outside!"

"……Okay!"

The two of them dashed out of the shop—and stood there, at a loss for words. Villagers were gathered all around them, each holding weapons like knives, clubs, and harpoons.

"……I mean…… are the people in the whole village in on this, man?"

The black-haired man's voice sounded exasperated.

"What should we do? Should we use that sword of yours to slash and kill them all, one by one?"

"We can't do that, can we?"

Gourry held his sword in one hand, but without drawing it from the scabbard, he asked:

"What is going on!? Tell us the situation!"

But the people only slowly tightened the circle of their siege.

"Do you guys understand what you're doing?"

The black-haired man raised his voice in his stead.

"Acting like you're going to kill someone is the same as declaring that you don't care if you get killed by the person you’re attacking. I’m telling you now, it’s going to hurt. Getting cut is."

He looked around at everyone.

"At first, it only feels like you’ve been slapped. But the moment you realize that what’s being sprayed around is your own blood, and that what’s rolling at your feet is your own

hand or foot, an intense pain comes. Actually, pain is putting it mildly. It’s a sensation like a red-hot iron skewer doing a tap dance in your wound, piercing straight to your brain. You might die from the shock, or even if your life is saved, you’ll be plagued by fever and pain for days, tens of days, or even hundreds of days until the wound heals. ──Now. Who wants to experience that first?"

Hearing this, the men were shaken. The black-haired man only had a small bag and a fishing rod, but Gourry was holding a sword. Even they knew their skills couldn't match a professional's. They might have been prepared for some sacrifice, but surely, none of them wanted to be that sacrifice.

"……Oh…… so no volunteers? Then, I’ll nominate someone. We're going, Gourry. I’m targeting……"

The black-haired man looked around—and pointed sharply at one side of the street.

"That way!"

The wall of people in the direction he pointed parted.

"Run!"

At the same time as the black-haired man's voice, the two of them kicked off the ground. The men, their spirits completely broken, didn't attack; they only pulled back. Gourry and the black-haired man easily broke through the perimeter and ran down the empty street.

Only then did the village head stumble out from inside the shop. Taking in the situation at a glance, he shouted:

"What are you doing!? Don't let them escape!"

But by the time his voice echoed, their figures had already melted into the depths of the evening darkness.

The mountain night was dark. Even the meager light from the moon and stars was blocked by the thick leaves of the trees, barely reaching the ground. The two of them were there, on the land ruled by that darkness.

"Oh-ho. They’ve even started a mountain hunt. They’re trying hard, aren't they?"

The black-haired man said in a carefree tone, watching the flickering torchlight approaching, hidden and revealed by turns.

"……Well, it’s bad for them that it was discovered they were trying to commit murder as an entire village. So, of course, they’d be desperate."

"……Say…… there’s something I want to ask."

"Hmm?"

To the black-haired man who turned around, Gourry said with a sincere expression:

"Why have you been carrying that fishing rod this whole time?"

"Don't worry about it. You know how there's always someone who wanders around hugging their pillow when a fire breaks out? It's the same thing."

……Was he actually flustered……? Gourry muttered to himself.

"Well, let's leave that aside. So? What are you going to do? From here on out."

"You, yourself—what do you intend to do?"

When asked back, the man said, for some reason, looking interested:

"Let's see…… the easiest thing would be to just escape somewhere else and forget everything."

"That's irresponsible…… at least report it to the authorities in another town……"

"Are you an idiot? Even if you told the authorities a story like this, they wouldn't believe you anyway. Even if they did believe you and an investigation started, if everyone in the village colluded, the matter would just get swept under the rug. Of course, there is a method that isn't easy, though."

"A method that isn't easy?"

"Yeah. Find out why they were targeting us and eliminate the cause."

"I see. Then, let's go with that."

"……You say that so casually. Man. Even if you hear the reason, there might be nothing you can do about it."

"You won't know that until you ask. Besides—"

Gourry lightly tapped the hilt of his sword.

"……Back home, there was a lot of trouble involving this thing. I thought, 'If only I didn't have this……' and jumped out with it in my possession. But you said, didn't you? That I might be able to do something with this. It wouldn't be bad to find out now."

"──Hmm──"

The black-haired man gave a small smile.

"Fine. Then first, let's grab those village folks and ask them what's going on."

He looked at the crowd of torches again—

"This way."

He said, and ran across the land without a path. Gourry followed half a step behind. Without a road, through the mountain at night with almost no light, the two of them ran down without much difficulty.

Before long, they found a group of four men. All of them held a torch in their left hand and some kind of weapon in their right. Before revealing their figures, the black-haired man intimidated them with his voice alone.

"If you make a sound, I'll kill you."

Jolt.

The men's bodies trembled. At that, he made Gourry wait in the depths of the thicket, and only the black-haired man revealed himself.

"The other one is right nearby. Don't even think about running."

The men were stunned for a moment—but,

"……Hah…… what are you acting so tough for, carrying a fishing rod!?"

Noticing what the black-haired man was holding, one of the men raised his voice. But the black-haired man didn't care at all.

"It'll be much more useful than the stick you're holding."

"What!?"

With the swordsman—Gourry—out of sight, they must have gotten bold. The man swung the club he held and charged at the black-haired man.

In an instant, the rod in the black-haired man's hand split the wind and let out a roar.

"Gah!?"

The man groaned, dropped his weapon and torch, and crouched down, clutching his face. The other three men didn't even know what had happened. Only Gourry, in the shade of the trees, saw that the tip of the bending fishing rod had grazed the man's eye with enough force not to blind him.

The black-haired man grabbed the crouching man by the scruff of the neck and dragged him up.

"……I'll have you know I'm a former mercenary. Even with my bare hands, strangling amateurs like you is nothing. If you don't want to be killed, speak. Why are you trying to kill us?"

"……W-w-we don't want to kill people either! But if we don't kill, we get killed! We have no choice!"

"Get killed?"

The black-haired man frowned—then released the man and jumped back significantly.

In an instant—

Boom!

The man's body was scattered! Blood splattered, and countless pieces of flesh flew everywhere. Silence. And then:

"W-w-whaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!?"

The three men who finally understood the death of their companion raised screams and fled. The black-haired man—did not chase them. He just kept his eyes fixed on the depths of the thicket—on the side exactly opposite to where Gourry was—and stood still.

"What is it!? What was that just now!?"

Gourry asked, appearing from the shade of the trees. The man shook his head left and right.

"Someone from somewhere pulled a strange stunt. It seems that guy is what's commonly called the mastermind. ……He's gone now, though."

Hearing this, Gourry cast his gaze around. Indeed, just before the man was killed, another presence had appeared—and Gourry had sensed it vanish just a moment ago, too.

"Who is it? That guy!"

"....."

Even to Gourry's question, the black-haired man kept silent, thinking about something intensely. Gourry let out a small breath, looked at the direction the men had fled—toward the village—

"The people who ran away…… they'll definitely misunderstand and think that you did that. What are you going to do?"

"Going to the village."

The black-haired man's answer was concise. As he said it, he began to walk.

"……Eh…… hey…… wait a second……!"

Gourry hurriedly chased after him.

"What do you mean, 'village'……!? What are you going to do!?"

"I’m going to do something about it."

"……No…… that’s why…… what do you mean by 'do something about it'!?"

"I have a rough idea of what’s going on. I do."

"Really!?"

"Yeah. But if I say it here and I’m wrong, it’ll be embarrassing, so I won't say it."

"What is that?"

"Don't worry about it. It’s just…… if my guess is right…… the opponent is going to be a slightly troublesome guy. You shouldn't follow me."

Hearing that, Gourry felt slightly annoyed.

"Wait a minute. I know from what just happened that you’re quite strong. But I, too, have some confidence in my skills, if I say so myself."

"Having 'some' confidence isn't enough. If you had the skill level of my eldest daughter—the kind that can take down a Thunder Dragon with a kitchen knife—that would be one thing, but……"

"Taking down a dragon with a kitchen knife…… there’s no way someone like that exists. ……But, for you to say your eldest daughter is old enough to hold a kitchen knife…… You’re actually quite old for your appearance, aren't you?"

"Shut up. Don't say 'as expected.' ……Well, whatever. Follow me if you want. But if I say 'run,' run without hesitation. Got it?"

"……I don't know if I 'got it'…… it’s hard to tell……"

"You don't need to understand, just run."

Saying that, the two of them went down toward the village.

The light of the torches flickering in the wind carved countless shadows into the wilderness. In the wasteland on the outskirts of the village, Gourry and the others confronted dozens of village men. A quiet murderous intent was filled among the men.

Quietly parting the tense air, the one who stepped one step ahead of the men was the village head.

"Why have you returned?"

When asked, the black-haired man, with his fishing rod on his shoulder:

"Well. I just wanted to see the face of the guy who’s giving you orders."

……*Rustle*……

The men grew noisy at his words.

"……Who told you!?"

"No. I just sort of thought that might be the case."

The black-haired man said to the village head who asked. The torchlight carved shadows into the bitter expression on the village head's face.

"……So you’ve sensed our circumstances too…… then…… please. Die for the sake of the village."

"Sure."

The black-haired man answered very easily. Everyone on the spot was stunned for a moment—before Gourry could raise his voice in protest.

"However, in exchange for that—"

The black-haired man pointed at the village head with his left hand.

"Before that, you, die for my sake. I’d be lonely dying alone."

"……Wh……!?"

At the same time as the village head's groan, the black-haired man pointed at another man, and then another man in order.

"And, after the village head, you die. Then you. Let’s see…… I’d like you to be next. Next is that……"

"Don't mess with me! Why should we……!"

One of the men pointed at raised his voice, and the black-haired man gave a sarcastic smile.

"Oh my. You can't die for others, but you want others to die for you? Don't look down on me. You bottom-feeders. I’d rather be eaten by wolves than die for your sake."

"Are you trying to provoke us?"

Rage was packed in the village head's voice. However, the black-haired man didn't care.

"Huh? Did you finally notice? Well, don't worry about it. You are indeed bottom-feeders, but you are better than the sub-human organisms that are hiding in the shade of the shack, trembling, and giving boring orders to you bottom-feeders."

The men froze at the black-haired man's words—

"──So you'd noticed. My existence──"

The voice was heard from away from the group—from the vicinity of the shack the black-haired man spoke of. Immediately, fear ran through the villagers.

"……Lord…… Ruzoul……"

Is that its name, which the village head muttered like a groan? The black-haired man turned his gaze in that direction.

"My youngest daughter dabbles in magic. Before I left on a journey, she told me many stories as half-boasting. You guys feed on people's fear and hostility, right? Binding people in small villages without even guards with fear, and making them kill visiting travelers?"

"……What an imagination……"

From the shadow of the dark shack, a human shadow appeared with a sway.

──A human shadow? For a person, wasn't the head too big? Besides, the thin body was too thin, and both hands were too long. The villagers murmured and backed away. And Gourry's eyes—in the faint light, he was ascertaining its figure.

The head, two sizes larger than an ordinary human's, had no hair, ears, nose, or mouth, and was densely covered with countless eyes, each the size of a baby's clenched fist. Of course, such a thing could not be human.

"……Wh……!?"

Gourry raised a voice of astonishment.

"Why is it talking without a mouth!?"

"That's the part you're surprised at!?"

The black-haired man immediately retorted.

"──It's a race called a 'Demon.' It's a troublesome guy, as expected."

"……Knowing that, you provoke me, and finish it with the word 'a little troublesome'…… You seem to have some confidence."

The Demon—Ruzoul—approached the group with steps that seemed to drift in the air. Pointing at the villagers with his thin, old-man-like hands:

"……Indeed, as you said, these people are just bottom-feeders. I ordered them. After killing a few as a warning. If you don't want to be killed any more, kill the travelers who stayed in the village with your own hands, I said. ……I thought one or two people would oppose…… but in the end, no one even tried to oppose. Moreover, they are dividing the money and goods of the people they killed themselves. They are the kind of people who would commit robbery easily, using the reason that they were threatened by me."

Told by the culprit, the air filled with an atmosphere that could not be distinguished between anger or awkwardness among the villagers. However, no one protested against Ruzoul. Ruzoul's eyes—all twisted into the shape of a smile simultaneously.

"However, that is precisely why── I like this village. I don't intend to let outsiders interfere. If you intend to ruin my preparations──"

"Kill──is that it? Like you killed the man who was doing the mountain hunt."

"That’s right. The true horror of a Demon── If you don't know it, I’ll teach you!"

Ruzoul's eyes opened wide. The black-haired man and Gourry jumped significantly—

Boom!

A moment later, the ground where the two of them had been standing exploded! For the villagers, it was an invisible attack. However, the black-haired man and Gourry's eyes had captured its true form. A black magic sphere created in the void. It was released by the Demon, blending into the night, flying, and exploding upon impact. The black-haired man closed the distance to the Demon in one breath. Ruzoul created and released black spheres one after another, but they didn't even graze the black-haired man. He jumped into his chest—

"And then what!?"

The Demon's mocking laughter. The black-haired man swung his right hand without caring. He hit the Demon's head with his fishing rod!

"──!?"

The Demon gave a soundless shriek and jumped back significantly.

"Impossible!?"

The color of astonishment was revealed in his voice. Gourry and the villagers didn't quite understand the situation. He was beaten without even trying to dodge, and there was nothing for him to be surprised about.

"……You want to say…… ordinary weapons shouldn't work on you Demons…… right? That it’s even a fishing rod."

The black-haired man said mockingly.

"For pure Demons, only spirit attacks like magic or ki are effective. Even I know that much. But conversely, if you can pour your ki into your tool like me, it doesn't matter if it’s a sword or a fishing rod. Well, I heard this from my daughter too, though."

"……I see…… but…… you don't have the power to defeat me in one blow, and you want to talk recklessly…… In other words…… you lack decisive power……"

"……Ugh! You figured it out!"

A line of sweat flowed down the black-haired man's cheek.

"Then perish! As the price for mocking me!"

Ruzoul created countless darknesses once again, and after a slight time lag, released them toward the black-haired man one after another. The black-haired man dodged them while moving at a dash—

In an instant—

One of the approaching black spheres split into countless small black spheres at close range!

"──Wha──!?"

The black-haired man's voice of astonishment. And—

Boom-boom-boom!

The successive explosions dug into the ground and kicked up dust. Ruzoul focused on the direction the black-haired man had been. Did he kill him—or even if he was alive, he couldn't be unscathed after that. But at that moment. Breaking through the dust from another place, Gourry rushed into the range! He drew his sword and swung it down diagonally! However, before the blade touched Ruzoul—the blade slipped out completely and flew far away. Perhaps the fitting that secured the blade had broken or come off.

──Thinking that you could do the same as that man, and you end up with that?──

The mocking words that floated in Ruzoul's heart were extinguished in an instant.

"──Light!"

Gourry shouted. Light was born from the hilt without a blade. The light, which had turned the person's spiritual power into a blade of magic, slashed Ruzoul diagonally from the shoulder to the torso!

—*Screeeeeeeeeeeeech!*

The Demon's bestial scream. However, even though he was slashed in the torso, Ruzoul did not fall. His main body was his head. Leaving behind the lower half of his body returning to a lump of soil, his head and chest floated up into the void to escape the range of the blade. At that moment.

"Ray-Flash Spear!"

The voice and the flash pierced the dust that had not yet cleared and pierced Ruzoul's head! This time, he couldn't even shriek, and the Demon groaned and writhed in the void. A shadow fell on his field of vision. It was—Gourry, who had jumped to a height with the help of his sword scabbard! He swung the sword emitting white light. Ruzoul's countless eyes reflected the approaching blade of light—

Clang!

The blow had split the Demon's head.

The wind blew. Carrying the scent of the tide to the wilderness. Ruzoul turned into black ash and scattered before he could fall to the ground. Before long, after the dust had vanished. Gourry and the unharmed black-haired man were all that remained. Gourry looked toward the black-haired man.

"……I didn't know you could use attack spells."

"I had my youngest daughter teach me. I intended to make this my trump card, but……"

While revealing a wry smile, he looked at the sword in Gourry's hand.

"……When I heard it was a sword with a history, I thought it was just a minor magic sword…… but…… the legendary Sword of Light, you say. Of all things."

He approached with a wry smile and placed his hand on Gourry's shoulder.

"Give it to me if you’re going to throw it away."

"You said you wouldn't say that!"

"You idiot! If it’s a minor magic sword, fine, but if it’s the Sword of Light, it’s a different story! Give it to me now, give it to me immediately!"

"That’s why I said no!"

"……It has perished…… right……?"

A different voice called out to the two of them arguing. When the two of them looked in that direction, it was the village head who had stepped out one step ahead of the villagers.

"……It has perished, right. The Demon. Ruzoul."

"……Yeah……"

The black-haired man nodded moodily and took out a cigarette from nowhere and put it in his mouth. Still, he didn't light it.

"……Thank you. With this, the village has been saved……"

"Don't make me laugh. Old man."

The black-haired man's voice pushed him away.

"I defeated it because I didn't like the way that Demon was doing things. That's all. Incidentally, even though you were threatened, you killed others, and now you're putting on a victim's face, I don't like you guys either. I will tell the authorities in another town about this incident. Clean up after what you have done. Got it?"

"……Th……that……"

"It's not 'that.' When the authorities come, don't play dumb or deceive them, tell them everything honestly. Otherwise— I'll come and destroy this village."

He said, and turned on his heel.

"Come on. Let's go, Gourry."

"Eh? Ah."

He picked up the scabbard and the steel blade that had slipped out, caught up to the black-haired man at a trot, and

"……Hey…… come to think of it, the Demon is gone, and couldn't we stay in this village?"

"You idiot. Can you stay in a village like this? What if they attack us, saying it's to protect the village's secrets?"

"Ah. Is that so?"

"Sleeping outdoors is still better. ……Ah— but if my clothes get dirty, the one at home will be noisy when I go back……"

"Are you henpecked? You."

"Call me a loving husband, you idiot."

The moon just illuminated the backs of the two leaving—

In the end—

It was only four days after they parted that Gourry realized he hadn't even heard the black-haired man's name. Can he really do something with his sword? To tell the truth, Gourry didn't really know. In the end, he felt like he couldn't do anything. But— Just a little bit. He felt like he might be able to do something. And today. On a single road through the forest, Gourry encountered a certain sight. Countless bandits surrounding a single girl. However— the girl in the appearance of a mage seemed to have considerable confidence in her skills. There was no trace of fear. He thought, 'is help unnecessary'— but— ──'What can I do with this sword'──, he thought…… It wouldn't be bad to try. Gourry drew his sword and raised his voice clearly.

"That’s enough of that."

And so, the swordsman—met the girl.

Fin

Sweet Potato II

The sky was gloomy. Clouds had been pouring out since the afternoon, blanketing the area. By the time I entered the inn and eatery in the nearby village, I could even hear the sound of distant thunder.

"Looks like a storm is coming," one of the few customers in the shop muttered.

I looked out the window, and the distant mountains were obscured by the white haze of rain. I had intended to travel to a town a little further away, but I didn't feel like pressing on in the rain. It was a small village nestled in the mountains, and this was the only place for lodging and food. Naturally, I couldn't expect much from the cuisine. As I was sipping the tea I had ordered—

A light flashed.

A deafening roar followed immediately, telling me just how close the lightning had struck. When the echoes of the thunder faded—

A figure appeared at the entrance of the shop. The shoulders of their white clothes were heaving up and down.

"Someone...! Please, someone lend me your strength...! If things continue like this, this village will be in danger!"

It would have sounded like nonsense, normally. In fact, the other customers only cast suspicious glances at the man at the entrance.

But— "What do you mean by that!?"

I stood up. I knew this wasn't just some delirious rambling. Because—

"Lina-san!"

The man finally noticed me and called my name. We knew each other.

"What happened, George?"

A feeling of foreboding raced down my spine as I questioned him.

It had been just a few days ago. I had heard there was a delicious cake shop in a small town I visited, and that was where I met him—George, the shop's patissier. Being obsessed with his raw ingredients, he had utilized the full extent of the magic techniques he had mastered in the past to even perform selective breeding on materials like chestnuts and sweet potatoes.

We had settled the trouble that occurred there—and just a few days after I left the town, we were facing each other again like this.

"I see...! You were here...! You were here for me...!"

He walked over to my table with somewhat unsteady steps and collapsed into a chair as if he were falling. After drinking down the water I offered in one gulp, he caught his breath.

"Please...! Lend me your hand...! If things continue like this... there's even a fear that the surrounding villages and towns will be devastated...!"

"What do you mean by that!?"

I lowered my voice and leaned forward. This wasn't the kind of conversation to have at the top of one's lungs. Even though there were few customers, that was exactly why there was a chance we could be overheard. George was in a stark white chef's uniform, and I was in my black mage's cloak—a combination more than enough to draw the curiosity of the other patrons.

Perhaps he noticed that, or maybe he just followed my lead, but he lowered his voice.

"I told you before that I'm obsessed with cake ingredients and am selectively breeding the plants I use... but not all the crops I modified are completed as ideal materials."

"Well, I suppose that’s obvious," I replied.

I didn't know the details, but according to books I had read before, selective breeding was the repetitive work of leaving behind things closer to the ideal from countless trials and errors. Especially when they were meant to be used as food. Naturally, there would be failures in such work.

He continued.

"Those failures sometimes serve as samples later on, so basically I keep them stored... but there are some that are too dangerous and must be kept sealed."

"Excuse me?"

I couldn't help but frown. ...What? Sealed because it's too dangerous? He continued, regardless.

"I think the mess from the other day influenced it in some way... but one of those things, a sweet potato that I had placed under an A-rank seal, 'Experimental Number 666,' escaped from its seal and fled!"

... The silence was heavy in many ways. Slowly. Slowly, I placed my right index and middle fingers on my temples.

"...Uh... well, that is... in other words..."

If I could—I wanted to reject this reality with all my might. I wanted to retort, "Potatoes don't run away!" and just laugh it off.

But. I had seen it before. The many plants he had 'selectively bred.' The potatoes that screamed the moment they were pulled from the ground. The chestnuts that ran wild, lured by the scent of plant fertilizer.

That was precisely why I understood. He was telling the truth. A ferocious potato had broken its seal and escaped. ...Well, understanding it and being able to accept it were slightly different things, though...

Suppressing my throbbing head, I continued.

"I'll let it slide because I'll be here forever if I start making petty retorts... but in short, if we don't find that thing and beat it, a lot of troublesome things are going to happen, right?"

He nodded with a serious face at my question.

"That's exactly it. I created it to efficiently absorb nutrients from rotting wood and leaf mold. However, its abilities far exceeded my expectations. It gained the ability to absorb not just rotting wood and leaf mold... but every non-living plant as nutrients...!"

"Non-living plants...?"

I frowned, not quite understanding what he meant. If he had said "living plants," I could understand the desire to make a huge fuss—it would become a vicious entity that parasitized and exploited all kinds of plants, causing forests and fields to wither. But if it consumed non-living—in other words, dead plants—I didn't feel like it would lead to what he'd initially blurted out, that "this village is in danger..."

Perhaps noticing my skepticism, he sighed slightly.

"Let me rephrase. In short—every wooden building is its food."

"—!"

I gasped in astonishment. I see... when I thought about it, that was true. In large cities, many houses were made of stone, but in mountain towns and villages with a lot of rain

and humidity, there were many wooden houses. Indeed, almost everything in this village was made of wood. And the timber used for houses was something that had been completely dried out—in other words, non-living plants.

"I see... that really is... no laughing matter..."

"That is why I truly want to borrow your strength."

I nodded firmly at George, who was staring intently at me.

"Got it. So, what's the payment?"

".....Eh?"

George's eyes went wide. I uselessly shook my teaspoon up and down.

"I mean, you're the one who made that thing and let it escape. ...Well, it's a situation where I can't just pretend I don't know about it, and I know you don't have a ton of cash, so I don't mind if it's not in the form of money."

"....." "....."

A silence bordering on a staring contest continued for a while—

George was the one who sighed and looked away. With the face of a wrongly convicted man right before his execution, he said,

"...Then, how about... all-you-can-eat cake at my shop..."

"Okay!"

I gave a sharp thumbs-up. George sighed again.

"Then... let's depart immediately. Time is of the essence."

Lightning flashed outside the window, illuminating his profile—

The sound of the thunder repeated, moving further away and then drawing closer again, but it showed no sign of fading. The clouds covering the sky were thick, and it wouldn't have been strange if it started raining at any moment. In the humid air, George and I walked down the path.

He had said he had an inkling of where *it*—the sweet potato—was lurking.

"A long time ago, there was a small village deep in this area," he said, as we left the main road and forced our way further into a mountain trail that was little more than a game path, winding beneath the trees. "Because a larger main road was built elsewhere, this road gradually became deserted... and because of that, no one lives in that village anymore."

He had visited it when he was scouting for land to cultivate crops, he explained. It was the perfect place for *it* to grow. Rows of houses that had rotted just the right amount, the humidity, the sunlight conditions—it was ideal. *It* was likely trying to store up power there. We had to do something before that happened.

"However," he added, "even if it’s not normal, a sweet potato is still a sweet potato. You can defeat it with the fire-based offensive spells you use, Lina-san."

"I see... But... what if it's not in that village?"

I felt a cold sensation on my cheek. The sound of water striking the grass and leaves around us began to echo. *It's finally started raining.* But George, walking ahead, didn't even show a sign of stopping.

"In that case... we’ll just have to hunt for it. Since it needs at least a few more days to store up enough power to begin full-scale activity, we should have time."

"Understood. By the way, two questions. Is that village still far? And is there a place where we can take shelter from the rain?"

It wasn't a strong rain yet, and the thick canopy of leaves overhead blocked most of it, but I didn't want to end up a drowned rat.

"We're almost there. And there’s a proper place to take shelter—"

"—Wait."

I cut off his words and stopped in my tracks.

"What's the ma—"

"Shh!"

I held my tongue and listened. Amidst the sound of rain hitting the leaves, I could definitely hear it. Multiple footsteps treading on the wet undergrowth, approaching us. A group walking in a place like this—could it be bandits?

I peered into the darkness formed by the trees toward the source of the sound—

Eventually, five men emerged. All of them were armed with swords and armor.

...Soldiers? In a place like this?

They finally noticed us, and stopped.

"You there! What are you doing in the middle of these mountains?"

The leader, perhaps? One of them called out, his tone arrogant.

"Just what it looks like—a mage," I said, spreading my cloak to show him. "Just doing some minor investigations. What about you? Soldiers out in these mountains?"

Judging that there was no need for caution, the man lowered his shoulders. "I don't have to tell you, but... fine. It's just mountain training."

"—That’s right! Lina-san!" George pulled on the edge of my cloak and whispered, "If we could borrow their strength—!"

...Haa...

I let out a small sigh at his suggestion.

"...Listen," I whispered back. "Do you really think normal people would believe us if we said, 'A dangerous potato has escaped, please help us exterminate it'? If we're not careful, they might just arrest us for being suspicious types spouting nonsense."

"That... would be bad."

"Exactly."

I turned back to the soldiers. "Well, talking in the rain isn't great, so we'll be on our way—"

But before I could start walking—

"Hey, where are you going? There's nothing that way but a deserted village," the leader called out again.

"That... is the target of my investigation."

"Coincidence. That’s our planned campsite as well. Want to come along?"

"—Captain!" another soldier said, his voice laced with reproach.

But the captain waved him off generously. "There’s no harm in it. Besides, it would be cruel to tell you to head back to another village in this rain." He grinned at us. "That works for you, right? Then it's settled. Let’s get moving."

He seemed like a straightforward, easygoing guy, if nothing else. He summarized the situation on his own and started walking, and his four subordinates followed without another word. George and I exchanged looks, shrugged our shoulders, and followed after them.

And thus, the party, now seven strong, headed toward the village in question.

By the time we arrived at the village, it was already quite dark. Pushing through the overgrown weeds, we entered the house closest to the village entrance. It wasn't large, but it was enough to keep a group of our size out of the rain and wind. There was no furniture left, but thankfully, there were no leaks in the roof.

Once the soldiers had taken off their armor and caught their breath, we had dinner. While almost everyone else took out dried meat, George, who had prepared well, pulled out a sandwich—which I immediately kicked him over for, and then looted. After spending a pleasant moment of relief, everyone went to sleep, lying down or sitting in their own spots.

...That said, it wasn't an environment where one could sleep soundly. I had settled in a corner of the room, wrapped in my cloak, and was drifting in and out of sleep when—

A shadow moved.

I opened my eyes slightly. The fire in the fireplace had weakened, but it still illuminated the room, and the cold air from outside crept in through a window that had lost its wooden shutters.

Just then, a soldier crossed in front of the fireplace and headed outside.

...Ah. A bathroom break, I guess...

I closed my eyes, drifting off again—

Gyaaaaaaahhhhhh!

The man's scream, tearing through the darkness, sent everyone jumping to their feet.

"—What was that!?"

"Augusta isn't here!" someone replied to the captain’s question.

"He's outside!" I shouted, and dashed out while chanting a spell.

The rain had stopped at some point. However, the sky was still covered in clouds, and there was no moon or stars—just darkness. I drew my short sword from my waist.

"Light!"

I conjured a magical light to act as a torch.

"Sorry, but could you do that too?"

At the request of the soldiers who had come out after me, I cast the same spell twice more. We split into groups of two and began our search.

"Augusta!" "Are you safe!?" "Hey!"

Not long after we started calling out:

"...Ca... Captain..."

A weak, male voice drifted from the depths of the darkness. Everyone rushed toward it simultaneously—

"—!?"

I almost let out a scream at the sight that met my eyes.

A clammy sweat clung to my back. The situation was spiraling toward the worst possible outcome. If I thought about it calmly, it was something I should have expected, but…

"I was looking for a spot to relieve myself… suddenly my feet were swept out from under me… I fell, and something wrapped around my entire body… and when I came to… this had happened…"

The soldier named Augusta returned to the camp and spoke in a trembling voice while putting on a change of clothes. *A change of clothes.*

Yes. He had been found completely naked.

"...Indeed... what on earth could have...?"

"It was that thing," I muttered, answering the captain's whisper.

Everyone's gaze shifted to me.

"Lina-san...!" George called out, his voice rising.

"There's no point in keeping quiet anymore, and now they'll believe us, right?" I said, turning my eyes toward the soldiers. "We told you we were here to investigate plants, but... this was likely the work of *that thing*."

"That thing... you mean...?" the captain muttered, his brow furrowed.

"That plant."

When I answered, the captain and the soldiers broke into laughter—

"It certainly felt like a plant vine..."

Augusta's mutter stopped their laughter. Taking the opening, I continued.

"And it seems that thing 'eats' dead plants for nutrition. For example, the lumber used for buildings—or, you know, clothes."

Everyone froze.

That’s right. Most common clothing is made of hemp or cotton—in other words, it is made from dead plants. To *it*, they were food. Silk or wool might be safe, but anything else was basically a goner.

"...Our clothes... are being eaten..." one of the soldiers whispered, keeping his eyes fixed on me.

"Hey, no extra imagination there!" I snapped, cutting him off immediately.

...Ugh... seriously... this is the worst... If the light source hadn’t been limited to the fireplace, they might have noticed my face turning bright red.

Regardless, I put on my best calm facade and continued.

"In short, if that thing starts its full-scale activity, every wooden building in the nearby villages and towns—and eventually, far-off villages—will be devoured. We have to take it down as quickly as possible before that happens. At first, I thought the two of us could handle it, but..."

I turned to George. "George. You didn't tell me it had the motor skills to attack people like that."

Asked, he looked away. "Well... to absorb nutrients efficiently and to defend itself from pests... I added a few... various things..."

"That’s not 'a few various things!' And what else? You didn't add any other strange abilities to it, did you?"

"No, that should be all. Other than the autonomous activity for over-consuming dead plants, self-defense, and predation, it’s just a sweet potato."

"At that point, it’s not 'just' a sweet potato, is it!"

"W-wait a second!" The captain interrupted our back-and-forth. He looked at us, half-dazed. "...You just said... 'sweet potato'?"

Naturally, his face was colored with suspicion.

...Ugh. There’s no helping it now. I scratched my head.

"Well, I don't expect you to believe it right off the bat. That’s why I was using roundabout terms like 'plant investigation.' You can believe it or not as you please, but don’t deny the facts."

I pointed with my eyes at the soldier named Augusta.

"So, did I lose to a potato vine...?" he muttered with a pathetic look on his face.

...I understood his desire to lament. Losing to a sweet potato was a crisis of identity, not just as a soldier, but as a human being. The captain furrowed his brows.

"Well, whether it's a sweet potato or not is another matter... But in any case, it is certain that there is something like a vine here that attacks people and strips them bare."

"And if we leave it alone, it won't stop at just this village," I added.

The captain groaned and crossed his arms—for a while, only the sound of the crackling fireplace echoed in the room. Eventually, he nodded.

"—Understood. We will cooperate."

"Captain!? But we are in the middle of training—"

He glared sharply at the soldier who started to protest. "If you prioritize training over an emergency happening right in front of your eyes, what kind of soldier are you?"

"S-sorry! My apologies!" the soldier said, shrinking back.

The captain turned his gaze toward us. "Now, specifically, what should we do?"

"Thank you for your cooperation," George said, nodding. "Basically, Lina-san will be the one to land the finishing blow. Please be aware—since the opponent is a sweet potato, you cannot destroy it completely by just cutting the potato body with a sword. In fact, if a severed piece flies off somewhere and we don't notice it, there is a high possibility it will sprout and revive. Attacking the potato body with a sword is arguably dangerous."

In other words, I shouldn't use a big move like a Giga Slave to blow the whole village away, since a surviving piece could sprout from the debris.

"Heat treatment is the best for total annihilation. A campfire would work, but... after this rain, it's difficult to find enough firewood. However, if Lina-san uses her fire-based offensive spells, it will be more than enough. In other words, if Lina-san becomes unable to fight, our chances of winning will diminish significantly."

"So we're just the support crew?" one soldier asked, clearly displeased. I mean, they'd just been told that a cute, beautiful girl (that's me, by the way) was more useful than they were despite their daily training, so it wasn't surprising they were annoyed.

"Don't say that. It can't be helped," the captain said, placating the soldier. "If we are to focus on support, we won't get to see that 'girl being attacked by tentacles' spectacle that every man wants to see once in his life. I understand that heartbreaking feeling well. But this is a critical situation. We must... bite the bullet and endure."

As the captain said this while stifling a sob, the soldiers began to cry manly tears.

"What exactly are you expecting...?"

"To explain in detail—"

"Don't." I cut him off with one word.

George looked around at the soldiers. "In any case, that's how it is. I'd like to ask you all to find the thing and stall it."

"Stall it? Does the potato walk?" one soldier teased.

"It does," George said, nodding decisively. The soldier's smile froze.

"Not on two legs like a human, but it uses its vines like a spider or something. However, because the vines have a high degree of freedom, be careful not to be deceived by the simple pace or height—you'll be caught off guard."

"To be caught off guard... Tell me, is that really a sweet potato?" the captain muttered.

George nodded decisively again. "Of course! Potato, vines, leaves—from any angle, it's a sweet potato! The potato body itself is about the size of a child, though."

"That's huge!" I and the soldiers shouted in unison.

The captain stood up with a sigh. "In any case, it seems we should start moving immediately. I'd like to wait until morning, but it'll be pointless if it escapes by then."

Everyone nodded in unison—and so, the midnight potato-extermination mission began.

The magical lights flashed in the dead of night. One, two, three, four. The lights multiplied, exposing the grass, trees, and ruined houses hidden by the pitch-black darkness.

At first, the soldiers had tried to explore using torches tipped with magical light, but on a night without moon or stars, that little bit of illumination wasn't just unreliable—it was inefficient. So, George and I began running around, lighting up the area like a stage.

The illumination spread further and further from the house where we had camped. The soldiers walked in rows, holding their swords like torches at the edge of the expanding light.

—Just then!

"Gwah!?"

One of the soldiers let out a shout and collapsed!

—Is it here!?

The other soldiers rushed toward him, and I began chanting a spell under my breath—

The fallen soldier stood up, his face awkward. "...Sorry... I just slipped..."

...Huu...

A chorus of sighs of relief. He bowed his head apologetically, saying, "I'm really sorry, reall—"

His movement and gaze froze. His awkward expression turned into a vacant stare. He was still facing my direction.

A premonition raced down my spine. I dashed forward immediately! I felt a faint wind brush against my back.

The sound of grass swaying behind me. That was the signal, and I spun around. The grass was moving. What was moving it—was a long vine with potato leaves attached to it. It wasn't just one. There were—

Gazazazaza!

Making a noise, the potato vines, tangled together like a net, rose up like a wave! They were pressing in to envelop me!

—Tch!

I swung my short sword once, twice. I slashed through the net of vines here and there—but one of the vines wrapped around my short sword.

Ignoring it, I pulled the sword with all my might—and in that moment, I saw it. Beyond the squirming vines, a shadow sinking near the ground.

That is—the main body of the sweet potato!

I found it!

At the same time as I thought that, I unleashed the spell I had been chanting!

"Fireball!"

Huygodododon!

More than a dozen arrows of flame colored the night, tore through the darkness, burned through the vines and leaves—and struck the potato!

Pigyaaaaaaaaah!

The death cry of the sweet potato echoed through the area.

You scream, too? You, too?

The remaining vines lost their strength and collapsed, and the area was filled with an excessively fragrant smell of roasted potato.

...Alright. I nailed it.

"Did you get it!?" the captain and soldiers shouted, rushing over.

I spun around—

Thwack.

I planted my heel in the captain's temple with a spinning kick.

"—Wh—What are you doing!?"

Even as he rolled twice and fell, he picked himself up and raised his voice in protest. I flared my shoulders and snapped, "Don't 'What are you doing' me! When someone's fighting, you don't just stand there and stare blankly! You come crawling over after it's done and ask 'Did you get it?' Are you really soldiers!? ...Or rather, you just wanted to see that 'tentacle vs. girl' thing you were talking about earlier, didn't you!?"

"It couldn't be helped. I wanted to see it."

"Don't you get all righteous about it!!"

...Ugh... honestly... men...

"George, too! Originally, it was..."

I scanned the area to complain—and then I fell silent.

When I realized it, his figure was nowhere to be seen. Magical lights were lit all around, and he was wearing white clothes that should have been conspicuous even in the night. Under normal circumstances, there was no way I could have missed him—

I looked around the area again—

"...My companion—where’s George?"

"Eh?"

The soldiers echoed in unison, looking around—

"—I... I’m here."

The voice came from the domain of darkness, beyond the reach of the light.

"...What are you doing?"

"Don't come over here!" he stopped me in a firm tone as I started to walk toward him. "...My clothes were eaten by it. I'm going back to the camp to put on new ones..."

"—Wait a second! 'Eaten by it' you say...?"

When I started my fight with the thing, George had been in the corner of my vision. And yet, if he'd been done in by it—

When, exactly?

Turning toward us—George threw despairing words from the depths of the darkness.

"...It... is probably not just one..."

He said.

"What do you mean!? 'Not just one'?"

Waiting for George to come back after changing his clothes, I threw the question at him.

"It means exactly what it sounds like. There was only one that escaped... but it is no longer just one. Its growth is much faster than I thought... It... has increased."

"Increased!?"

Everyone besides George echoed in unison.

"Wait! Wait a minute! You said its only abilities were eating dead plants and moving! If that's the case... 'increasing'... did you add some other weird ability to it!?"

George flinched at my intense questioning, but answered, "Wh... What are you saying, Lina-san? Extending vines and increasing from there is a characteristic sweet potatoes originally have."

...

"...Ah... now that you mention it..."

I scratched my head. "I completely forgot it was a sweet potato."

"...I mean, that thing really isn't a sweet potato, is it."

"No, it isn't."

The soldiers whispered behind me.

George pulled himself together. "In any case—the situation is serious. If we don't exterminate them all as quickly as possible, they will increase exponentially."

"But... we don't know how many there are, do we? Can we really find and defeat them all...?"

The captain showed some weakness, and George thought for a moment.

"...No—it should be possible." He looked around at everyone. "Originally, there was only one. It extended its vines, stretched its roots, and increased its numbers. In other words, there must be a 'queen'—like a queen bee or a queen ant—somewhere."

Doesn't that usually just get called a 'seed potato'? I thought, but since everyone else was listening so seriously, I decided not to point it out for now.

"If we find that queen, we can follow the vines extending from it, and naturally, we should be able to discover all the smaller potatoes!"

"Oh! Like pulling potatoes from a vine!" the captain said, impressed by the literal expression. "If there is a way, we must execute it! Let's show these potatoes the true power of humanity!"

"Ooh!" the group shouted.

And so, the midnight potato-extermination campaign began in earnest.

To be perfectly honest, George held out quite well.

He dodged frantically, occasionally throwing stones to distract it, and perhaps the Queen—wary of me having disappeared—didn't throw its full strength into capturing him. Still, there's a limit to how much one can run. He eventually tripped, and the potato vines closed in—

The moment they were about to strike, the vines suddenly stopped moving. George looked back toward me.

He had heard it: the sound of footsteps that shook the earth.

Reflected in George's eyes, backlit by the brilliant magical light I'd set up, was a colossal, human-like shadow. It was a crude, oversized stone doll. It was a stone golem I'd fashioned by casting a spell on the seated statue that had been in the center of the village.

It wasn't just a basic golem. I'd adjusted the spell to hollow out the inside so that I could climb right into it. The golem moved its limbs in perfect sync with my own. It was like wearing a golem-shaped suit of armor! With this, I could exert power far beyond that of any human, and even if I got wrapped in vines, I didn't have to worry about my clothes being eaten!

Clang, clang, clang! I marched toward the Queen, my footsteps echoing loudly.

Shongyaryaaaaaaaah!!

The Queen let out a cry of rage and extended its vines toward me. Dozens of them wrapped tightly around the stone arms and legs of my golem! If I were flesh and blood, I'd be immobilized, but—

Snap! Crack!

The golem's power tore through the vines with ease!

Seeing that it had met a formidable foe, the Queen threw the captured soldiers aside and unleashed an even greater number of vines from all directions—top, bottom, left, and right—closing in on me. The amount of vines wrapping around my limbs was several times what it had been before. Even I couldn't tear these off easily.

Kishurururururu...

The Queen tied my golem into a spread-eagled position, convinced of its victory, and let out a triumphant, joyful shriek.

The very next moment—

"—Fireball."

FWOOM!

My strike hit the Queen dead-on!

Even while controlling the golem, I could still manage a simple spell. I'd waited for the moment when most of the vines were tangled around the golem's limbs, leaving the Queen's main body completely wide open.

Kya-gyaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!!

The Queen's scream echoed through the area. As the majority of the vines burned away and its hold loosened, I didn't miss the chance. I forced the golem to pull on the remaining vines with all its might, bunching all the smaller potatoes and vine-clusters together in one spot. Then—

"Fireball!"

The bursting flames delivered the final blow.

By the time the sun began to rise in the eastern sky, the scent of roasted sweet potato hung heavy in the small, abandoned mountain village.

After we defeated the Queen and the smaller potatoes, we all checked the area to make sure none had escaped. We found two or three stragglers, but they were instantly incinerated by my spells. We checked the area two or three times over—and it seemed the matter was finally settled.

"But... nobody is going to believe a story like this," the captain said as we explored the area.

"If I report to my superiors that we fought a mortal battle with sweet potatoes all night, I'll be fired on the spot," another soldier said with a bitter smile.

George looked troubled, his face full of anguish. "Even if it couldn't be helped in the pursuit of deliciousness, to have created such a terrifying thing... Perhaps... I was wrong..."

"You don't need the 'perhaps.' You *were* wrong."

I retorted without a shred of hesitation.

"Eh!? How so!?"

"Was that reflection just for show!? ...I really hope not, but... you don't happen to have any other dangerous prototypes stored away, do you?"

"Of course not. That was the very last one. Truly."

Oh, really? He looked away while saying it. *This guy.*

I let out a small sigh and said in a cheerful voice, "Well, once this place is cleared up, why don't we all march over to George's place, destroy all the dangerous materials, and as an apology, make him treat us to all the delicious food we can eat? Sounds like a plan, right?"

"Ooh!"

"Eehhhh!?"

The soldiers' shouts and George's dismayed scream echoed through the morning air—and thus, the incident came to a successful, if somewhat chaotic, end.

(Sweet Potato II: The End)

Author + L

Author: Xia.
It's the season when I find it strangely easy to fall into a deep sleep after burning mosquito coils.
L: I think that's simply because the incense is working.
Written by: Am I a mosquito!?
Anyway, Slayers Special Volume 21,
We present to you "Your Name Is Sweet Potato"!
This time, we've also included the Gourry side story, "What Lies at the Tip of the Blade"!
L: No, that's not so much a Gourry side story as it is a Lina's dad side story.
It's commonly known to the public as "Lina's Father Side Story."
Author: Wha...!? What are you talking about!? I don't remember writing anywhere that the mysterious old man with the fishing rod is Lina's father!?
L: I have no idea what's upset you about...
No matter how you look at it, that's what it is.
She even claims that her eldest daughter killed a Thunder Dragon with a kitchen knife.
Written by: You can't base your argument on such flimsy clues.
For example, in Lina's hometown, there's a good chance that there are tons of people like that!
This conversation might have taken place between Lina's childhood friends A, B, and C and her older sister from her hometown!

A: "Um, the restaurant where you work has a hiring requirement of 'being in good health,' right? Are there any specific criteria for that?"
My sister said, "Apparently, you just need to be able to take down a Thunder Dragon with a kitchen knife."
B: "Oh, is that all it takes? Anyone can do that."
C: "Then maybe I should get a part-time job too."
A: "What?! That's not fair! I was the one who thought of that!"

And so, after hearing that conversation, Lina leaves a note saying, "I'm going on a journey. Don't look for me," and that's how the Slayers story begins.
L: Just destroy it. That land that's like a monster free-for-all.
Seriously, the author shouldn't make joke statements that contradict the official setting.
Written by: Muu. Well, what I mean is that anything not explicitly stated in the story always holds the potential for other possibilities.
Your Honor, we can't completely rule out the possibility that that person isn't actually Lina's father, but rather the father of that monstrous childhood friend.
So, naturally, there's even a possibility that the person Gourry met at the end of that story wasn't Lina at all, but someone completely different!
L: Wow, everything's ruined.
...Well, the illustration in the special issue definitely depicted Lina, though.
Written by: Well, you know.

But I didn't specify the illustration.
L: But if it's not explicitly stated, that means there's another possibility, right?
Even when talking about potatoes, it's possible that what the other person insists is a sweet potato is actually a different creature.
Written by: That's a bad possibility, isn't it?
However, even as the author, I can't completely deny it.
L: Surely—
In that story, the pastry chef was researching recipes one night when a shining object fell from the sky onto the hill behind his house.
So when I went to take a look, it was a small crater, and something spindle-shaped was wriggling in the center, and when I poked it with a stick, a green thing stretched out and wrapped around it—
Ah, this is definitely sweet potato, I thought.
Written by: "It's not 'no doubt about it,' notice it!"
Wait, is this already outer space?!
However, the source material for the newly written story is obviously *that* story, so the complex reality is that it's impossible to completely deny it.
L: And so on, in a very natural flow of conversation.
Actually, I happened to bring back about a dozen creatures that looked like them, which I found living in a certain place today.
Spindle-shaped. Green tentacles... or rather, vines.
Written by: That's not a natural progression! And what did you just say, "Shoku..."?
L: See? It's become attached to the author! (With the expression of a young lady walking her dog on the beach)
Written by: Hold on a second, don't try to instigate something like that in such a refreshing way.

Grind, crunch, crunch. Squish. Squish, squish, crunchy, crunch, crunch.

L: Lately, I've been really struck by how many different nuances the word "like" can have.
Anyway, if the author has become attached to something and stopped moving, that means I'm supposed to take over and move forward on my own.
Okay, so for now, let's start with information on upcoming Slayers Special publications.

Slayers Special
It will be released every Monday from now on, and the afterword is 240 pages long!
Each issue includes 40 full-color illustrations!
The distributor is DeAgostini!

Yeah. It should be something like this.
The bonus items are things like a large 2-liter plastic bottle of Chaos Juice.
The first issue... or rather, the special 22nd volume, features the 100 best afterwords from around the world!
Wow! I want to read this! Let's just ignore any opinions that it's not Slayers anymore!

Well then everyone, see you again at the bookstore on Monday!

(Afterword: The End)